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THE RISEN DEAD

THE RISEN DEAD

A Novel

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," "A SCARLET SIN," ETC., ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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THE RISEN DEAD

CHAPTER I.

A MOTHER'S RETRIBUTION.

THE Cascine Gardens were open for the evening, and thronged with visitors both English and foreign. Rows of coloured lamps were suspended from the foliage, and festooned across the paths. At one end large placards, placed before an illuminated entry, invited the public to patronise the *café chantant* at a few scudi a head. At another, dancing was briskly going on beneath a canvas canopy. In an open space the band was playing to an audience seated on green chairs, and chattering in the pauses of the music. All through the gardens were to be found sequestered paths and bosquets where affectionate

couples could exchange their confidences. The various costumes of the visitors formed also an amusing study. Some were in evening dress, with opera cloaks and crush hats; others, just as if they had started on a country stroll. The majority of foreigners were in uniform, the majority of Englishmen in suits of tweed. Lady Culwarren's party, however, were very accurately attired. Next to wealth and position the Countess loved dress, and was almost as particular about her niece and Miss Paget as about herself. The three ladies, therefore, in their fashionable evening wraps, with tasteful *négligés* upon their heads, were objects of great attention to the public, and Lady Culwarren was thoroughly enjoying herself until she suddenly discovered that the Earl, who had escorted them thither, had given her the slip and mingled with the crowd.

"Now, where *is* Culwarren gone?" she exclaimed. "He was here not a minute ago, talking to me about the last *morceau* the band played. Lily, my dear, did you see your cousin leave us?"

"No, Aunt Emily, I did not. I think he must

have missed us in the crush. I fancy I caught a glimpse of him just now talking to one of those extravagantly dressed ladies in the white satin hats and feathers!"

"No, impossible, my love! You must be mistaken!" replied the Countess; "I cannot for a moment suppose that Culwarren is acquainted with such people. Such extraordinary costumes and so very *décolletées!* Besides, if he were, he would have mentioned the fact to me. Dear Miss Paget, can *you* see him anywhere?"

"Nowhere," said Miss Paget, listlessly.

"*Nowhere?*" repeated her ladyship.

"Nowhere."

"Oh, dear me, Miss Paget, I wish you wouldn't say *nowhere* in such a provoking manner. It is ridiculous to suppose that he is *nowhere*! He must be *somewhere*."

"Then it is hardly necessary, dear Lady Culwarren, to become nervous over his temporary absence," suggested her companion.

"Oh, it is of no use talking to you about him, Miss Paget. You have no sympathy. Are you

sure you saw Culwarren talking to some one, Lily? I do hope he has not formed any improper acquaintances. He is so young, dear boy, and the young are easily led astray."

"He is older than Anthony," remarked Miss Paget.

"Miss Paget! I will not have that name mentioned in my presence. I wish to forget it—to have it forgotten. I have said so before, and I think you show a very bad example to Lily in disregarding my wishes. I am sure the young man has done harm enough in contaminating my poor Culwarren."

"Anthony has contaminated Culwarren?" interrupted Miss Paget in her surprise.

"Certainly! I mean what I say! I know it is only Anthony's bad example that has led Culwarren astray."

"He must be easily influenced, then," replied the companion.

"Oh, of course I am wrong, as usual," said the Countess, huffily. "But you can see the effect of the intimacy for yourself. And every day seems

to make Culwarren cling to his boon companions more and more. He has been led on to play for high stakes, too, and to lose a considerable sum of money. He confessed as much to me yesterday, when he had to send to England for a large remittance."

"I am sorry to hear it, Lady Culwarren. *That* is a real grievance, and one which you should exert all your influence to check, and especially as the Earl is rather weak and yielding in character," said Miss Paget. "But on what grounds do you suppose that Mr. Fosbrooke and Anthony have had any hand in inducing him to risk his money?"

"Who else should do so, Miss Paget? He is always with them or some of their low Bohemian set. You know that Culwarren scarcely ever touched a card at Gardenholme. If he goes on at this rate much longer, I believe he will be ruined."

"Oh, no, no; we must take some means to stop it before that," exclaimed the companion.

"Good gracious!" cried Lady Culwarren, suddenly, "there *is* Culwarren, and actually

talking to a very bold-looking person in pink. This must be put a stop to at once. Come, Lily, my dear, with me."

She set off at a quick pace as she spoke, but the girl lingered for a moment behind.

"Dear Miss Paget, can it be true? Is there any fear that Anthony would injure Culwarren?"

"I don't believe it," replied the elder woman, in a voice of pain; "Anthony is too generous—too true. It must be your aunt's anxiety that makes her see everything in its worst light. But go, dear child, or she may be angry. I am a little tired, and will rest on this bench till your return."

Lily ran after Lady Culwarren, and Miss Paget sat down and pressed her hand upon her burning eyes.

"And she believes," she thought to herself, "that I can neither understand nor enter into her feelings. What would she do if she had to suffer such a grief as mine? She cannot bear to be separated from *her* son for a single hour, whilst a whole lifetime divides me from the child I

brought into the world. He may be erring—sinful—in poverty or in sickness, yet I dare not stretch out my hands to him and say, 'Come to me, and find rest and comfort here.' Oh, I cannot endure this penance much longer. Some day I fear the pressure will be too great, and I shall burst my bonds and tell him *everything*. Yet, for my dead brother's sake, and the pride of my family, I must try to be patient and endure it to the end."

She was sitting and musing thus, with her face bowed down upon her hands, when a passing footstep was arrested before the bench on which she sat, and a soft voice spoke her name. Miss Paget raised her head quickly; Anthony Melstrom stood inquiringly before her. Her first impulse was to hide her face again.

"Miss Paget," he repeated, "won't you speak to me? Are you set against me like the rest?"

"Oh, no, no, Anthony," she cried, lifting her burning face to his and extending her hand, "never believe that — never. I am your friend always—to the end."

His answer was to take a seat beside her.

"Then tell me what is the matter, and why do I find you here? Are you ill?"

"No, dear, no. Why should you think so?" she said, gaining courage to address him in the old way.

"Because it is such an immense surprise to me to find you here in Florence. Is anything wrong? Have you left Lady Culwarren?"

"Certainly not. Surely you know she is in the city. You have seen your brother—I mean the Earl."

Anthony looked down.

"Yes," he answered, slowly. "I *have* seen the Earl, but I had no idea that his mother and you were with him. The circumstances of his visit to Florence have prevented all allusion to his domestic affairs between us."

"I do not understand you, Anthony."

Somehow, the young man had kept possession of her hand, and she loved, although she trembled to feel it in his clasp. She had always been his friend and protector in his childish days, and she

seemed like a link between his lost home and himself to outcast Anthony. So he pressed the hand he held fervently, and made her chilled blood flow quick and warm each time he did so.

"I need not mind speaking frankly before you, Miss Paget. You were acquainted with the state of my heart with regard to Lily all along, and I am sure you sympathised with me at the sad ending of my hopes. But though I have tried to battle manfully with my disappointment, I have not forgiven the part Lord Culwarren took in it, nor will the old sore bear handling yet. And so when I encountered him in Florence and he asked me to be friends with him again, I replied it could only be on one condition: that he never mentioned the subject of his wife to me."

"His *wife*, Anthony! *What* wife?"

"Why, the *ci-devant* Miss Osprey, I conclude. Surely he has not jilted her as she did me?"

"Culwarren has jilted no one. He is not married."

Anthony sat up and pushed his thick hair off his brow.

"Not married! Who is Lady Culwarren, then?"

"His mother, of course. There is no other Countess yet. Lady Culwarren and Miss Osprey and I constitute the party at the 'Hôtel Villa Pomona.' We came here for the winter, not dreaming that you were in the same place."

"When *are* they to be married, then?" asked Anthony.

"If you mean Lily and Culwarren, I am not sure that it will ever be."

"Are they not *fiancés*?"

"No."

The denial was drawn from her unwillingly. She was so afraid of the effect it might have on the hopeless love of the young man beside her. Her fears were not unfounded. Anthony's reply was conveyed by a fervent "Thank Heaven."

"But why that thanksgiving, Tony?" she asked him, quickly. "What difference can it make to you? You can never offer your hand again to Lily Osprey. You are too proud to do it. Oh, my dear boy, don't be offended with me if I speak

plainly. Would *you*—a penniless, nameless man, link your fate to a girl who would have to give up her family and friends in order to become your wife? Lady Culwarren would never consent to the connection. She is strangely — bitterly set against you, and only on this account. She will not hear your name mentioned. You have no chance with Lily so long as her aunt lives."

"Don't you be too sure of that, Miss Paget," returned the young man, hopefully. "To hear that my darling is still free, and for love of my unworthy self, has put new life in me. If I *am* nameless and penniless, I will not remain so. I will make a name for myself, and build up a fortune, and strain every nerve for success, so long as Lily will wait for me. And when the time has come to make her my wife, I will carry her off, under the very eyes of Lady Culwarren herself."

"Foolish boy," replied the companion, sadly; "you would do far better to forget you ever saw her. The hill of Fortune is very hard to climb, Anthony, and Love, when won, too often turns—

like the apples on the Dead Sea's shore—to ashes in the mouth."

"Are you going to desert my cause, then, Miss Paget?" said Anthony, reproachfully. "If you become heartless and unsympathetic, I shall have lost my last friend."

"Anthony! I would give you your heart's desire if I could."

"Then spare me casuistry. It is useless to tell me to forget—to assure me I have deceived myself, or that the wound will soon be healed, when every nerve is throbbing with the pain of an unsatisfied affection. I love Lily with my whole heart and soul. I always shall so love her. You can never have known the power of a true attachment, or you would not torture me with useless advice."

The companion heaved a bitter sigh.

"Oh, Anthony! you do not know. Forgive me if I have wounded you. My only wish is to prevent your wounding yourself more."

"You mean that it would be wiser for me to cut all connection henceforward with the family of

the Culwarrens—that I shall suffer less if I never cross their path again. Perhaps you are right, and yet, cruelly as they have treated me, I can't shake off the old habit of believing I belong to them. Miss Paget, why did they treat me so harshly? Was I not brought up at Gardenholme? The Earl, my brother, Lily, my first love, the Countess my—— No! I will never call her by that sacred name again. No *mother* could, even in thought, have treated a son with such unmitigated insult. My own poor mother, who, I suppose, is sleeping in her grave, I would rather, a thousand times, have shared her lot, whatever it may have been, than reared in all this pomp and affluence, to be made the football of Fate at last!"

"It has been a cruel lot, dear Anthony. Your poor mother, however much she may have sinned, would have suffered the severest retribution had she lived to see you now."

"Not a word against my mother, Miss Paget. Although I may never even learn her name, the thought of her will always be a sacred one to me. Ah! What would I not give now, in this moment

of abandonment, to have the refuge of a mother's love?"

"Anthony!"

"You feel for me, dear friend. I know it," interrupted the young man, pressing her hand, "and I thank you for your sympathy. And yet you would advise me not to seek my Lily."

"I advise nothing, Anthony. Follow the dictates of your heart. Perhaps it will guide you to a truer end than the experience that has embittered me. But you will not put yourself in the way of Lady Culwarren?"

"To receive a second insult. I think not. But where is Lily?"

"She is in these gardens, Anthony. She left me half an hour ago, in the company of her aunt, to join Lord Culwarren."

"In these gardens! So near, and yet so far apart from me," cried Anthony. "But where can I meet her alone? Where does she walk by day?"

"That I cannot tell you, Anthony, and you must not ask me. It would be a breach of trust.

Lady Culwarren confides her niece to my charge, and I dare not make any appointments for her without her knowledge."

"Then I must trust to my own wit, Miss Paget, for see Lily and speak to her before she leaves Florence I must and will," replied Anthony, rising. "And now good-bye. For all your kindness in the past and present I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Won't you try and think I am a little boy once more, Miss Paget, and kiss me as you used to do both night and morning? It seems so long since I felt a good woman's kiss upon my brow."

He bent his handsome face towards her as he spoke, and she caught him suddenly to her, and kissed him two or three times, almost passionately, upon the forehead.

"My boy, my *dear* boy," she murmured, "take care of yourself. Keep your heart up, and never let your troubles lead you into wrong. Think when you are tempted—and your present life must hold so many temptations—what your—your—poor mother would wish you to do or say. And

may God bless you for—Lily's sake. Good-bye!" She almost thrust him from her, as though she could not trust herself in his presence a moment longer, and rising from the bench which they had occupied, walked hastily down an adjacent path. Anthony looked after her in some surprise till she was lost to view, and then, with a lighter heart for the unexpected *rencontre*, went whistling on his way to join his friends.

CHAPTER II.

THE RISEN DEAD.

MEANWHILE, Lady Culwarren, accompanied by Lily Osprey, had pushed her portly person through the crowd which surrounded the band, until she had reached the side of her son, who was apparently engaged in a very interesting conversation with the lady in pink.

"Culwarren!" she called, sharply, as she came up to him, "one moment, if you please. I want you to——"

The Earl stayed for an instant to apologise for the interruption to his fair companion, and then, with a profound bow, left her to attend to the Countess.

"Well, mother," he said, with an air of annoyance, "and what is it?"

"I wish you to walk with me, Culwarren. It is an unheard-of thing that you should desert your mother and your cousin in a public assembly, in order to dance attendance on a painted-up creature like that."

"Hush, mother, for Heaven's sake!" he exclaimed, in an agony of fear; "she will overhear you. You are utterly mistaken. That is Her Highness the Princess of Montanza."

"Princess of Fiddlesticks! I don't believe a word of it," cried the Countess, quite forgetful of her dignity. "If she *is* a princess, why doesn't she behave like one? You never saw Princess Louise or Princess Beatrice going about in a public garden in a dress without any bodice to it. If *that's* the way princesses dress in this country, the less you see of them the better."

"Really, mother! How much oftener will you force me to remind you that I intend to choose my own acquaintances?"

"Not whilst *I* am with you, my dear. You brought your cousin and Miss Paget and me to the fête to-night, and it is your duty to stay with

us; and if I see you talking to that creature in pink again, I shall speak to one of the police and get her turned out of the gardens."

"Pray don't make yourself ridiculous, mother," whispered the Earl, as they encountered the figure of a gentleman in evening dress. "This is Mr. Fosbrooke — Oliver Fosbrooke, you remember— Anthony's friend."

Lady Culwarren stiffened herself up directly with becoming majesty, and made the coldest of bows to the gentleman in question. But Oliver Fosbrooke was not a man to be easily put out of countenance. He stopped at once, and the Countess was compelled to put out her hand.

"Lady Culwarren," he exclaimed, "this is most fortunate. I hardly hoped to have the pleasure of seeing you here to night. And Miss Osprey, too. What a heavenly evening! I trust you have been pleased with the performance. I ought to apologise for not having left my card at the 'Hôtel Villa Pomona' before now, but my young friend Culwarren has always had something else to propose when I purposed doing myself that honour."

"Lord Culwarren seems to have effectively discovered the way to fill up his time away from home since he came to Florence," remarked the Countess, coldly.

"Now that's too bad of him; it is, indeed," laughed Fosbrooke; "but you must forgive us at the club if we have kept him away too much from you, Lady Culwarren. He is such a boon to us poor cynics. There is nothing so delightful as freshness and youth. The first brings back the past to us and rekindles our expiring hopes—and contact with the second renovates our digestions. What we shall do without his lordship when you leave the city, I cannot imagine. He is the life and soul of the club."

"Fosbrooke has too good an opinion of me, mother. You must not believe all he says," interposed the Earl.

"I do not," replied the Countess, in the same frigid tone.

Oliver Fosbrooke put on his most insinuating air.

"And is it possible that Lady Culwarren can

suspect me of a want of candour when speaking of her son?" he said. "I assure you I never was more serious in my life."

"Well, I cannot approve of the intimacy, Mr. Fosbrooke, and I tell you so candidly. If there were no other objection to it, it brings him in contact with a person with whom I hoped he would never again associate."

"If you mean Anthony, mother, I shall never give up his acquaintance nor his friendship as long as I live."

"There, Mr. Fosbrooke, you see what your teaching has led to," exclaimed the Countess, angrily.

"To the exercise of charity towards a young man whose only fault lies in the fact that his parents thought more of themselves than they did of him, Lady Culwarren. I plead guilty. Anthony is a fine character, and I am fond of him. Perhaps more of my liking for Lord Culwarren is due to the goodness of heart he displays towards his unfortunate young brother—pardon me, I should have said friend."

"No, Fosbrooke, you are perfectly right," said the Earl; "I regard Anthony as a brother, and shall always do so."

"I must beg you to drop the subject. It is not one that interests me or is fit to be discussed before my niece," exclaimed Lady Culwarren. "We will wish you good evening, Mr. Fosbrooke. My son is about to see us home. I have walked till I am quite tired."

"I will see you to the gates, mother, and put you into a carriage, but I cannot return to the hotel just yet. I have other engagements," said Culwarren.

"What engagements? I insist upon knowing. With that creature in pink?"

"No, no. I have bid the Princess farewell for this evening. But I have other friends."

"Culwarren, you must not leave me again to-night. These late hours will ruin your health."

"Nonsense, mother, you exaggerate," said the Earl, with a frown.

"Will you permit me to remind you, Lady Culwarren," interposed Fosbrooke, "that in this

climate at this season of the year the safest time to sally forth is when the sun goes down. All the world does the same. Your maternal anxiety does you credit, but it is without cause. And after all, so long as we take sufficient rest, what does it matter if it comes to us before or after dawn? A cigarette, a glass of *limonade,* and half an hour's chatter with a pretty girl in the moonlight never seriously injured any man's morals yet. And I will stake my reputation that Lord Culwarren is one of the most virtuous young men I ever met."

"Very good of you to say so, I am sure," returned the Countess. "At the same time, I don't consider that he has changed for the better since he has associated with the gentleman he calls his brother again. But I cannot wait about any longer. Since you refuse to come home with us, Culwarren, you will at least have the politeness to conduct Miss Osprey and me to the gates."

"Certainly, mother," replied the Earl, tendering his arm. "But where is Miss Paget?"

"Miss Paget! Didn't she come with us, Lily?"

"No, Aunt Emily. She said she was tired, and would rest on the bench till we returned. She thought we should go back the same way we came."

"Very ridiculous of her to think when nobody told her to do so. I am far too fatigued to walk back to the bench. She must find her way home by herself."

"Shall I run back and tell her, Aunt Emily?"

"*You*, Lily? A girl of your age running about these public gardens at night by yourself! I never heard of such a thing. You must be lost to all sense of decency."

"Can *I* be of any service to you, Lady Culwarren?" interposed Fosbrooke. "I have not the pleasure of knowing the lady in question, but I am acquainted with every inch of the Cascine Gardens, and if you can give me any clue to the particular bench you allude to, I shall doubtless find her."

"It is a green wooden bench under a flowering

lime, Mr. Fosbrooke, at the top of the path which faces the lake, and is lined with tubs of orange-trees," said Lily Osprey.

"I know the exact spot, Miss Osprey, and if Miss Paget is there still shall be sure to meet her. Is she an old lady?"

"Oh, no; she has a very sweet, dear face, and she is dressed in black velvet, with a black lace cloak, and a hood drawn over her head."

"Your description is most accurate. And what shall I say to her from you, Lady Culwarren?" continued Fosbrooke.

"Tell her to come home at once," snapped her ladyship. "If my son has forgotten the duty he owes me, at least *she* will not. But, upon my word, I shouldn't be surprised at anything, for the whole family seems changed since we came to Florence. Good night, Mr. Fosbrooke. Come, Culwarren, I will not be kept standing a minute longer."

She turned away, with a curt bow, as she spoke, and Fosbrooke, having made a profound obeisance to the two ladies, put his hat on his

head again, lit a cigarette, and went on his way with a sardonic smile.

"Ah!" he thought to himself the while, "you may coax, and wheedle, and worry as much as you like, my lady. He is safe in the toils. He lost more last night than he will pay with half his yearly income, and he is bent upon winning it back. *That* means—the other half. He is beginning to be just a little afraid of me now—and a little afraid of Anthony. And to tell truth, I am just a little afraid of Anthony myself! I don't want him to find out the extent to which Culwarren is losing, or his Quixotic and rather too amiable spirit may think we are just going a trifle too far. Ha, ha! I wonder if his noble father can see him now, and recognise the irony of Fate in the mentor provided for his son and heir? The spendthrift younger son was no match for the Earl of Culwarren's sister, eh? Who has the worst of the bargain now?" But as his musings reached this point, Oliver Fosbrooke's demeanour changed, and the wicked laughter died out of his eyes, driven thence by a sigh of recollection.

"Hang it all, I mustn't think of that," he said to himself, "or I shall become more reckless than I am. How is it that Time, with all its boasted power, can put no chains upon the demon Memory? Why must we always carry about with us this cursed burden of remembrance? And yet the bitter is not unmingled with the sweet. How wonderfully lovely she was in those days when I won her heart, and persuaded her to elope with me, when we lived together, believing honestly that we were man and wife! Then came the Nemesis of earlier folly, and we heard that the adventuress I had married in a fit of pique against my father, and thought dead, still lived to curse me. And my love left me, horror-struck, and the grave closed over her despair. And yet we hear so-called respectable matrons with marriageable daughters, women who are cognisant of all the evil that passes in the world, argue, when pleading the cause of some desirable *parti*, that young men must sow their wild oats. What miserable sophistry! I sowed mine in my youth, and in my age I reap the melancholy harvest.

"Bah! What am I thinking of? So long as we have money, what more remains to be desired? Money will buy everything in this world, even love — or an excellent imitation of it. Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. He is the wisest worshipper who carries his god in his pocket, and knows that his religion need never interfere with his pleasure.

"And now for the landmarks of Miss Paget's whereabouts. Opposite the lake, at the head of the path which is lined with orange-trees. This is it, beyond a doubt, and there, by Jove, is the poor lady herself, patiently awaiting the return of her employers. What a terrible thing it must be to be a companion!"

He drew himself up, however, and gave a hasty glance at his toilette as he approached the spot, for Fosbrooke's Bohemian life had never made him forget the conventionalities of society, nor the time when he had been flattered and beloved by women. Miss Paget was seated in an attitude of meditation on the same bench where Anthony

Melstrom had found her, and to which she had returned as soon as he had passed out of sight. Her face was downcast and her eyes fixed upon the ground. She did not stir until Fosbrooke, having halted before her, took off his hat and pronounced her name, and then she started violently and looked up, and the lamps and the moonlight fell full upon her features, white as chiselled marble. The effect upon her companion was overwhelming. He fell backwards as though he had been struck, and his eyes seemed protruding from his head with horror.

"My God!" he muttered under his breath. "It is not. It cannot be. Speak! in Heaven's name. Who are you?"

Miss Paget had risen hastily, and was about to elude him, when Fosbrooke clutched at her garments and detained her.

"You shall not go. You must not go until you have answered my question. My brain is whirling—I am not fit to think or speak. I was sent here to find Lady Culwarren's companion, and find—*you*."

"I *am* Lady Culwarren's companion," fell in subdued accents from Miss Paget's lips.

"But what else—what else?" cried Fosbrooke, excitedly. "Who are you—where did you come from? Am I dreaming? What awful mockery is this?"

Miss Paget drew herself up to her full height and looked at him contemptuously. The sickly glare of the coloured lamp falling upon her white face made it ghastly. She might well have stood for some revengeful spirit of the dead.

"Do you call the uninterrupted pain of two-and-twenty years a *mockery*?" she said. "Do not be afraid. I am not a spirit risen to reproach you for your cruel treachery. I am only the wretched remnant of a life your passions wrecked."

"Not *dead*! not dead!" he exclaimed. "Why, I received the news in your brother's own hand-writing. He told me you had died at that—that very moment to which we had both looked forward as the consummation of our love. Why was he so cruel?"

"Cruel! He was kind. Had Heaven been

as merciful, I *should* have died, and not been compelled to carry my burden of shame and misery into old age."

"To which it was my misfortune, not my fault, to subject you," cried Fosbrooke. "Oh, Diana! do me justice."

"Justice!" she echoed. "Do you ask for justice at *my* hands, to whom you were so cruelly unjust? What other man worthy of the name would have persuaded a young and innocent girl to become his wife before he was certain that he was free to make her so?"

"I believed that I was free. You knew that I believed it."

"That did not prevent my ruin. I returned to my dear brother's hands a dishonoured woman—the first dishonour that had fallen on our name. I should have been thankful if he had killed me then and there. It was some time before they could trust me not to kill myself. But when I found my punishment was not complete, and Heaven refused to relieve me of the burden of my tarnished youth, do you suppose I could have borne to appear in

the world again as Diana Melstrom—to be pointed at, and pitied, or reviled, as the humour took it? I was too proud for that. I would have thrown myself into the river first. There was nothing left for me but to die in seeming, since I could not die in reality. And so Culwarren, who was always too good and kind to me, brought me back from this very place—where I lived until the circumstances of my life and death were forgotten—and presented me to his wife as a companion. And I have lived with her ever since. That is my history. I tell it to you because I am compelled to give some explanation of my presence here; but I regret the compulsion should have arisen. Now it is over, please to let me go."

"No, no!" exclaimed Fosbrooke, eagerly; "you must not leave me yet. I am not myself. The shock of meeting you thus—risen, as it were, from the very dead—has unnerved me. I cannot believe that it is true. That I have been deceived for so many years, and you did not die."

"*Die*," she repeated, scornfully. "If every woman who wakes up to the consciousness that she

has been betrayed lay down and died, there would be fewer of my unhappy sex remaining to endure the torture of a life of shame."

"There is not a reproach which you can hurl at my head which I have not hurled there already," replied Fosbrooke. "Diana, if you could know the life which I have led since our separation, you would say that you had been amply avenged. For I loved you—you *know* that I loved you."

"You *thought* you did, perhaps! But our notions about love must differ."

"You never doubted it whilst we were together."

"I did not know you whilst we were together. I thought I was the wife of an honest man, who had told me everything I had a right to know. I could not guess that you were playing fast and loose with a name which I cherished far above myself."

"And *you* loved *me*," he persisted.

She turned upon him with her pale face all aflame.

"*Loved* you! Yes, with a very agony of love,

the mere remembrance of which has power to move me like a child, with a love so pure, so single-hearted, and so unalloyed, that you should have learnt to sanctify and not to curse it."

"But you were, to all intents and purposes, my wife. You might, but for your own headstrong will, have been so to this day."

"*Wife!* Do not dare to name the time when you presumed to call me so. I *never* was your wife. I was nothing but your wretched dupe, and I am still your victim."

"But let me speak to you," cried Fosbrooke. "Now that I have found you, let me tell you something of my life. I dare say Lady Culwarren has made the worst of me to you. She considers me a species of outcast—a Bohemian—a *vaurien.* Perhaps she is right, but it is remorse that has made me what I am. For years after I received the news of your supposed death, I was heart-broken. Yes! Notwithstanding the curl of your lip, I repeat the word—*heartbroken!* I had not only lost what I loved most on earth, but I had planted a sting in my own breast which I knew I

should feel until I joined you in the grave. What was there left for me but to wander forth, Ishmael-like, and try to drown my sorrow—any way—anywhere—so long as it left me for a little while in peace? I had no home—no wife—no love! That is the secret of my dissipated life."

"You are still tied, then," said Miss Paget.

"I do not know; I do not care. After I lost you, all interest in home affairs deserted me. I had but one aim—forgetfulness."

"May you find it, then, more successfully than I have done," she said, as she again essayed to pass him.

"You shall not go—not yet. Let me tell you, if I can, what I feel at finding out the extent of this lifelong deception. It has been a bitter lesson, but it is past. It is unspeakable joy to me to know that you still live, whom I have mourned as dead."

"To you, Arthur," replied Miss Paget, "I *am* dead. You killed my heart and all the hopes it cherished. I *was* Lady Diana Melstrom; I *am* Miss Paget, the humble friend and companion

of the Countess of Culwarren, and Miss Paget knows no man who bears your name."

"You are bitter," said Fosbrooke.

"Am I? So has my life been. Yet I did not mean to let it influence my words. But you must see for yourself that it would be impossible for us to meet except as strangers. Am I to do away with this long, weary sacrifice of silence and tears, to drag my brother's honoured name in the dirt, to cast a shameful slur upon the Countess and her children, after they have fed and sheltered and supported me for so many years? I would not do it for any man, far less for one who treated me as you did. Therefore if, as you say, you have any regret for the time when I was innocent and happy, give me your sacred word of honour that you will never disclose to any one the fact that we have met before."

"I promise. But it is hard to give you up a second time."

"Hush! There is no giving up, I am not yours; I never was so but in my own imagination. But if you fail to keep your word to me from

carelessness or any other cause, you will drive me forth from this quiet shelter to a life of restless, lonely misery, perhaps even to my grave, for I could not bear the shame twice over. It would make me desperate."

"I have wronged you enough already," replied Fosbrooke. "You need fear no more from me. Yet, if in the course of time——"

"What can time do for me?" she asked. "Can it patch up my damaged reputation, restore my faith in you, my youth, my beauty? No, Arthur, there is no future for either of us, except the future in another world. Yet I am glad that we *have* met, though we must never meet again."

She held out her hand to him as she spoke, and he took it and pressed it reverentially to his lips. Then she continued in a voice that audibly faltered:

"Good-bye. If the past holds any tender memories for you, let it influence your present life for good. I am afraid you are rather reckless, Arthur — that yours is not in all respects a safe example for a young and thoughtless man.

Anthony"—here Miss Paget paused a moment to clear her throat—"Anthony was my little pupil before he went to Harrow, and I should be sorry to hear he had forgotten all the lessons I taught him in his childhood days, especially now that he has lost the protection of his home and friends. I think you must be fond of him to have made him your companion. Will you go still further, and constitute yourself his guardian and exampler?"

"I will try," replied Fosbrooke, moodily. "I have a real affection for the lad, and would not willingly see him come to harm. I know the life I lead is not a good one for him, but since you ask me, Diana, I will keep him from the evil as far as lies in my power."

"Thank you. He has a good heart, and may do the rest for himself. And now I must join Lady Culwarren, or she will think that I am lost."

"She sent me to find you, and to tell you that she has returned to the hotel. You will let me see you home in safety."

"No, no," she cried, hurrying past him. "I have borne all that I can bear to-night. Good-bye for the last time, and remember you have pledged your sacred word of honour never to betray that you have seen me."

And before he could utter another word of remonstrance or entreaty, she was gone.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENGLISH LILY.

ANTHONY MELSTROM did not confide to Fosbrooke that he had met Miss Paget and heard that Lord Culwarren was still a bachelor. He was too much afraid of incurring a second edition of his cynical friend's opinions upon love, and of hearing his deepest feelings ridiculed as the outcome of folly and inexperience. He was resolved at all hazards to see and speak with Lily Osprey before she left Florence, but he kept his hopes and his intentions to himself. Neither, strange to say, did Fosbrooke mention his meeting with the Countess and Miss Osprey in the Cascine Gardens, but his reasons for silence were very different. He feared lest Anthony's excitement at the news that Lily was still to be won would absorb him to the exclusion

of all other feelings, and he wanted his assistance more than he had ever done. Hitherto the desire for revenge had made Anthony eager to encourage Culwarren to go any lengths at the gaming-table; but if the motive were withdrawn, there was no saying what revulsion the young man's mind might not undergo. He might even begin to look at the matter from a moral point of view And the Earl himself was just beginning to be a little shy. He had lost to the extent of several thousands lately, and was seriously beginning to question whether baccarat and écarté were paying games. A word from Anthony was always sufficient to make him try his luck again; but if Anthony once commenced to caution him, there was no saying what might happen. Fosbrooke was making a little fortune out of Culwarren. He had scarcely ever had the plucking of such a fat pigeon before, and he calculated to get a couple of years' income out of him before he left Florence. The thirst for gain was full upon him, in fact his blood was up, and it would have gone hardly with the man who tried to baulk him. His encounter

with Lady Diana Melstrom had made him rather more reckless than less. He saw how she despised him—that the space of a lifetime had not served for his forgiveness, and at the same time he felt, in the depths of his world-hardened and cynical heart, he loved and admired her still. He had promised her to be good to Anthony. Well, this *was* being good to him, he thought, to keep him, as far as lay in his power, from following a will-o'-the-wisp that could only land him in an irretrievable slough of despond. So Oliver Fosbrooke kept his own counsel, whilst Anthony dreamed his own dreams. He made no difference in his behaviour to Culwarren or any one, for he was totally occupied with the one idea how to gain admittance to the presence of Lily Osprey. The "Hôtel Villa Pomona" was surrounded by a garden of trees and flowering shrubs, containing a bowling-alley covered with trellis-work for the use of the English visitors, and many an ornamental bench for the accommodation of smokers. Anthony was well known there, as in most of the public places in Florence, and it was quite easy for him,

after having drunk a glass of lager at the buffet or purchased a few cigarettes, to seat himself in the garden for as long as he thought fit, and watch the people who came in and out of the hotel. So there he used to betake himself morning after morning, and lie perdu until he should be assured that Lily was left at home and alone. It was some time before his object was accomplished. Each day the Countess's carriage took its stand under the portico of the hotel, and she would sally forth, accompanied by Miss Paget and Lily, and take her morning drive. At such moments Anthony would peer eagerly through his leafy screen at the face of the girl he loved until the carriage had driven away, when he would return to Fosbrooke with a countenance as long as a hatchet. Would they *ever* go out, he used to think to himself, and leave his darling behind? Could Lady Culwarren have any suspicion that he was watching for an opportunity to speak to her? Had Miss Paget, in an excess of duty, betrayed him to her employer? He fancied that Lily looked pale and anxious as well as himself.

Once he was sure she turned her head and gazed at the bosquet behind which he sat. At any rate, he would not miss a single morning, but watch and wait till he was rewarded. At last his opportunity arrived. One day Lady Culwarren came down the flight of marble steps accompanied by Miss Paget only, and she was fretting and fuming in so loud a voice that no one could fail to hear her.

"It's so annoying," she exclaimed; "these things always seem to happen on purpose. I could have better spared her any other day this week. Lily would remember the exact spot where we saw the cottage with the piece of majolica, and you know the terrible memory I have for anything of the sort."

"I don't fancy we shall have much difficulty in recognising it," replied her companion. "Abruzzio is only a little village."

"Only a little village, of course, but every cottage is exactly the same in appearance, Miss Paget, so how are we to tell one from the other?"

"Why not put off the journey, then, till Lily

can accompany us, and take a drive round the city instead?"

"I shall do no such thing," retorted the Countess. "Abruzzio is ten miles off, and we may not have such another day for the expedition. Do get in, Miss Paget. Who are you staring at in that extraordinary manner? I don't think it very ladylike."

"No one, no one," exclaimed the companion, as she took her seat in the carriage, and the order was given to the coachman to drive to Abruzzio.

"Abruzzio," thought Anthony. "Thank Heaven! They can't be back under three or four hours. My luck has turned at last. All things come to him who knows how to wait. Now, I wonder if Culwarren is out of bed, and if he would resent my appearance here. I must risk it. I must risk everything now to get speech of my darling again."

He waited till the carriage was well on its way before he sauntered into the vestibule and asked one of the waiters in Italian if milor Culwarren had risen. The waiter returned with the valet of milor

—a servant who had been engaged to travel on account of his proficiency as a linguist, and was fortunately unknown to Anthony. He informed him, with a deferential air, that his master had returned home only two hours before, that he had at once retired to bed and ordered that he was not to be disturbed on any account, so that he deeply regretted that he could not deliver monsieur's message to him. Monsieur begged he would not distress himself. He would not have the slumbers of milor broken for all the world. He would have the honour of presenting himself another day.

"Cul is going it," he thought. "He must have some other haunts beside ours. He left us at one o'clock. Well, it's no business of mine what he does with himself."

He returned to the garden for another ten minutes, to give the Earl's valet time to disappear, and then he entered the hotel again, and desired the waiter boldly to show him up to the presence of Miss Osprey. The man mounted the marble staircase mechanically. Anthony followed him with his heart beating like a sledge-hammer. They

entered two large white and gold folding-doors, which admitted them to an ante-chamber.

"Le nom de monsieur?" said the waiter.

"Dites à mademoiselle que monsieur son cousin s'attend," replied Anthony.

He heard a half-smothered exclamation follow the announcement, and then the man held back the *portière* for him to enter, and Anthony passed into the further apartment and found himself once more face to face with Lily Osprey.

She was standing, with one hand pressed against her heart and her lips slightly parted with expectation, awaiting his approach. Dressed in white, with a bunch of Florentine roses in her bosom, she looked in Anthony's eyes more beautiful than ever, but all he wanted to know was how she felt towards him.

"Lily," he exclaimed, with his arms held out, "are you glad to see me?"

"Oh, Anthony!" she cried, and ran straight into them. Then there was little need to ask any further question, for she sobbed, with her hands clasped round his neck, and he kissed her tears

away, and they knew, without telling, that they were all the world to one another.

"Oh, Anthony," she said, when she could find words to speak, "why did you not come before?"

"My darling, if you only knew the difficulty I have had to come now. I have been watching my opportunity for the last ten days, Lily, ever since I met Miss Paget in the Cascine Gardens."

"Oh, *did* you meet her there? She never told me."

"She wants to keep us apart, Lily. She thinks I am too presumptuous to aspire to your hand. And so I am; but we loved each other before all this trouble, and my heart has been hungering for you ever since we parted."

"And so has mine for you. I have been looking for you everywhere. I thought you would be sure to see me somehow as soon as you knew I was in Florence."

"My darling, do you know the reason that I have not tried to do so sooner?"

"No, Tony."

"Because a false rumour reached me that the

Lady Culwarren mentioned in the papers was yourself—that you were married to the Earl, and the news nearly broke my heart."

"Tony, that will *never* be. You need not fear it."

"Are you *sure*, Lily? Culwarren loves you. When I am out of sight again, will not the Countess persuade you to do as she wishes and become his wife?"

"Not now. Sit down, dear Anthony, and let me talk to you. I am so glad of an opportunity to be able to tell you the truth. Before you returned to Gardenholme I was very uncertain and very shy. I was not sure if you still loved me, and my aunt wheedled and coaxed me so to marry Culwarren that I hardly knew how to combat her arguments. But when you came back and spoke to me I felt I loved you only, and after —after—that terrible disclosure——"

The girl's voice faltered, and she drooped her head and hid her eyes upon his breast. Anthony clasped her tightly to it, and she could hear the rapid beating of his heart.

"Ah, my dearest girl, that disclosure is the unconquerable barrier between us. With that hideous truth staring me in the face, I may break my heart for the loss of you, but I can never ask you to be mine."

"No, no, Tony, don't say that!" cried Lily, clinging closer to him. "It may not be true. But if it is, it is not your fault, and I love you all the better for it."

"My noble-hearted girl! But how could I take advantage of your generosity, Lily, and when a man like Culwarren is waiting to raise you to one of the highest positions in England?"

"I do not want Culwarren. I will not have him. I have said so twenty times."

"But I have no money to offer you, Lily, and not even a name. I am poorer than the veriest clod who knows his origin," said Anthony, bitterly.

"My poor, *poor* Tony," replied the girl, sweetly, with her lips laid softly against his; "then you must want me all the more, and my love shall try and make up to you for what you have lost."

"You are my world," he cried, passionately, "and your words repay me for everything. But Lady Culwarren will never give her consent to your marrying me."

"I shall not ask her," said Lily, proudly. "I shall wait till I am of age and come into my money, and then — if you will still have me, darling."

"If I will still have you," exclaimed Anthony, fervently; "if I will enter into heaven when the door is open, you mean, Lily. Oh, what have I done to deserve such unexpected happiness?"

"You are Tony. That is enough for me. I have told Miss Paget so, often, but she is too much afraid of Aunt Emily to encourage me. But somehow, lately, I have felt as bold as a lion. I knew you would come to me, darling, and that everything would be right between us, and that we should be engaged as we were before. Are we engaged again now, Tony?"

"If you consent to it, my sweetest, you will make me the very happiest man in Christendom."

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"Take my ring, then," continued Lily, putting a half-hoop of diamonds on his little finger, "and give me yours in exchange."

"But mine is a signet ring, darling, with the crest I believed myself entitled to upon it. Lady Culwarren is sure to recognise it, and tax you with having it in your possession."

"Let her recognise it, Tony," replied the girl, with a defiant toss of her little head. "I shall wear it on my first finger, so that every one may see it, and when I am asked about it, I shall say my future husband gave it me as a pledge of his fidelity. How surprised you look! You don't know me again for the coward you left me at Gardenholme. Ah! it is the joy of having regained my love that has made me brave, and now I feel equal to defying the whole world."

"You dear, sweet child! You are too good to a poor outcast like me," said Anthony; "but the shadow of my life mustn't fall on you sooner than it need. Be careful, sweetheart. For the next two years Lady Culwarren holds your comfort, if not your happiness, in her hands, and we both

know how bitter and cruel she can be when crossed."

"She will not be able to hurt *me* whilst I have the assurance of your love. And now, dear Tony, tell me all about yourself. How do you live? Have you any employment? How do you earn money to pay for your clothes and everything? Does Mr. Fosbrooke pay it all for you?"

Her innocent, trusting face was lifted full to his, and her velvety eyes were searching his countenance with a look which showed she had no doubt of learning the truth. But how could he tell it her? Anthony glanced back at the career of the last few months, and blushed with shame, for he felt that he and Fosbrooke had simply been living on their fellow-creatures.

"I heard the solicitor, Mr. Ashfold, tell Aunt Emily that you had refused to accept the money left you by Uncle Culwarren," went on Lily, wistfully; "and I have often lain awake since and wondered, darling, if you had all you wanted, or if you were in need of anything."

"No, dearest; I have never wanted," replied Anthony, with a heightened colour, "though Fosbrooke and I have lived very much like the birds of the air, and hardly known from day to day how we should fare the next. But he has been a dear, good friend to me, and you may always think of me as safe in his hands."

"I shall love him, I am sure," cried Lily, enthusiastically, "for befriending you. But, Tony," she added in a less jubilant key, "ask him one thing for me—not to encourage Culwarren to play for money."

This request took Anthony completely aback.

"My dear girl, who has been telling you of such things?"

"Aunt Emily. She is always talking about it. She says that Culwarren is a different man since he came to Italy, and Mr. Fosbrooke has led him all astray. Of course, she says *you* have as well, but Miss Paget and I never believe that. But Culwarren is sadly altered indeed, Tony. He never writes poetry or reads now, or goes out driving or walking with his mother, but lies

in bed till the afternoon and stays out all night, and is *so* cross. And Aunt Emily says he has lost thousands and thousands of pounds. Is that true, and is it your Mr. Fosbrooke who has done it?"

Anthony's hand had gone up to shade his eyes.

"I am afraid it is partly true, Lily. I know that Culwarren has played very high lately, and lost a good deal of money, and he is much in the company of—of—Fosbrooke and the friends to whom he has introduced him."

"Oh, Tony, and haven't you tried to prevent it?" cried Lily, in a voice of reproach.

"It is not of much use trying to stop a man who is bent upon going his own way," said Anthony, evasively, "and the Earl is no longer a boy. But I might have said more to him, perhaps. I am sorry now I didn't."

"It is cruel; it is wicked," exclaimed the girl, in a tearful voice, "that they should let a man who knows nothing about such things go drifting on to his ruin. Tony, you *must* stop it. Indeed

—*indeed* you must. You may not look on Cul as a brother any longer, but you did once, and you were always good friends till *I* came between you. And now I am all yours, and you must do this thing to please me. You must win Cul back to his old way of thinking, and let him see how unhappy he is making us all."

"*You* into the bargain," said Tony, with a needless touch of jealousy.

"Yes, indeed; for Aunt Emily lays all the blame on me. She declares if I only consented to marry him, Culwarren would be content to remain at home, and that it is my perversity that has driven him to dissipation; and of course she will reproach me still more now. Oh, Tony, for *my* sake, persuade him to give up gambling. If you don't, I shall begin to fancy *you* will take to it next, and that would make me miserable."

A sudden sense of remorse hit Anthony Melstrom between the joints of his armour. A sudden conviction of all he owed this girl in return for her fresh young love, of all he was bound to

do in order to render himself worthy of it and her, came over him, and the whole aspect of life was changed. He rose and folded her in his arms.

"I *will*, darling," he said, "I promise you. From this moment I will do all I can to save Culwarren from further injury. Lily, I have been selfish and wicked. Disappointment and a sense of injury have made me see everything in a distorted light, and I have not cared what became of Culwarren, or myself, or any one. But now that I have the assurance of your love, I will try and deserve it better. And you shall see the first fruits of my reformation in poor old Cul. Oh, Lily, what a grand thing love must be if the very first taste of it can make a man's belief in himself break under him like a rotten reed! Darling, you are the angel of my life. From this moment I shall be a better man for knowing that you love me."

They talked on for some time longer in the same strain, and did not separate until the carriage returned from Abruzzio, and Anthony

had just time to slip away by the broad balcony that ran all round the hotel, but not before he had pledged his word to remonstrate with Lord Culwarren that very night.

CHAPTER IV.

A FATAL INSULT.

HE returned to his apartment with the light of love beaming in his eye, and yet a serious look upon his countenance. He had already begun to view the unworthy part he had taken in luring Culwarren to the gaming-tables in its true light, and was resolved to do his utmost to remedy the evil; but he was afraid he should have some difficulty in making Fosbrooke adopt his view of the subject. He found that gentleman out of bed, but not dressed, sitting in the little balcony that abutted from their room, with a *robe de chambre* wrapped carelessly around him and a cigar in his mouth, inhaling the soft southern breezes that blow from the river. He greeted Anthony affectionately, but with some

little discontent, as though he had a right to have enjoyed more of his confidence of late.

"Well, *mon cher*," he commenced, "and where have you sprung from? You are a very sociable young man. This is the third morning I have waked to find you flown and Antonina bewailing over your cold coffee. What has developed this talent for early rising in you of late?"

"The beautiful weather, I suppose," replied Anthony, as he drew out his cigarette case. "It's a shame to spend the time in sleep on such a morning. Really, Fosbrooke, we are growing altogether too dissipated. I confess I'm getting a little tired of this turning night into day business myself."

Fosbrooke elevated his eyebrows.

"Hullo! what's this? Not turning virtuous—eh? No more cakes and ale. Why, Tony, I'll soon cure you of this fit by sending you to bed at eight o'clock regularly for three or four days in succession."

"Do you think you would, old man? I believe I should rather enjoy it. I wish Culwarren

would take to decent hours. He wasn't up when I called at the 'Villa Pomona' just now."

"Well, it's not to be expected. He can't burn the candle at both ends."

"He left the Palazzo Ferrini before I did last night."

"True! But he accompanied Tomkins and myself to Braganza's private rooms, where we played loo till five o'clock this morning."

Anthony bit his lip and looked down.

"Well, my son, and have you anything to say against it?" demanded Fosbrooke, after a pause.

It was the opportunity he wanted, and he seized it.

"Yes, Fosbrooke. I wish you would leave Culwarren alone for the future. He has lost more money than sufficient in the last fortnight, and I think it is time we left off fleecing him."

"Leave Culwarren alone! Do you know what you are saying? Why, he has only just commenced to bleed. We must have thousands more out of the fool before he leaves Florence."

"Well, then, I'll have nothing more to do with it," exclaimed Anthony, warmly. "It's gone on long enough in my opinion, and I won't take another step to hound the man to his destruction. He's not my brother, worse luck! but he always behaved like one to me in the old days, and I am sorry that I've been so bad a friend to him now."

Fosbrooke set down the cup of coffee he was carrying to his lips, and stared at the young man with the utmost astonishment.

"Have you lost your senses?" he said, quietly. "I've seen an alteration in you lately, Tony, but I didn't think it had gone as far as all this. Nothing more to do with it! Have you forgotten your revenge — the punishment you vowed to mete out to Lord Culwarren for the beggarly way in which he stole Miss Osprey from you?"

"He has not stolen her," rejoined Anthony, quickly, "and he never will. She is still Miss Osprey, and she is still—engaged to me."

"Oh!" ejaculated Fosbrooke, with a long whistle, as his eyes wandered to the diamond

circlet on Tony's little finger. "So *this* is the meaning of your early rising and strict attention to virtue, is it? The fair Lily has seen you—has renewed her vows of constancy—and has extracted a promise of reformation from you in return—eh?"

The young man flushed uneasily, but stuck to his colours all the same.

"Look here, Fosbrooke, it's no use your laughing at me, for you will not alter my determination. I wish to be frank and open with you. You are my friend and entitled to my confidence. I have seen Lily and heard that she is true to me, and I have promised her to try and wean Culwarren from this fatal infatuation for the cards, which is making them all very unhappy, and which I, unfortunately, have done so much to foster, and therefore from to-day I must refuse to countenance his gambling even by my presence."

Fosbrooke sank back in his lounge again.

"You may come or you may stay away, *mon cher*, just as you like," he said, as he blew a

cloud of smoke through his nostrils; "but you will not attempt to influence the Earl by any animadversions on the course of action he chooses for himself."

"But, Fosbrooke," exclaimed Anthony, with some excitement, "that is impossible! I have passed my word to do all in my power to dissuade Culwarren from continuing this lamentable habit. I cannot keep it without remonstrating with him on its dangers and entreating him to give it up."

"Then I forbid you to do it," replied Fosbrooke, angrily. "I introduced the man to my friends at your request, and they have been obliged to let him win in some instances, so that he may lose with the better grace when their turn comes. Do you suppose I am going to let them waste their money and lose faith in me because you happen to have turned psalm-singer at the instance of a woman? No such thing. Keep to your love-making if it pleases you, but leave the Earl to me and to my chums. I utterly resent all interference on your part."

"And I shall do as I think fit," returned Anthony. "You seem to forget, Fosbrooke, that I am not a child to be ordered about at the will of you or any man. I have passed my word, and I shall keep it."

"Then you and I will quarrel."

"Quarrel!" repeated the young man, starting. "Oh, no, I hope not, Fosbrooke, for if anything occurred to part us, I should feel utterly alone."

"Then promise me not to mention this subject to Culwarren."

"I cannot! I feel bitterly ashamed when I think of the harm I have already done him in the attempt to revenge myself for a wrong which existed only in my imagination. I cannot let it go on any longer. If Culwarren will not listen to me, I cannot help it. But I have pledged myself to speak to him."

"Then your blood be on your own head," replied Fosbrooke, passionately, "for if you keep to your resolution you will bitterly repent it."

"Do you mean that you will cut me, Fosbrooke?" said Anthony, in a voice of pain.

"I mean that—and a great deal more!"

"And this is what you call friendship!" said the young man, bitterly. "Well, it is a choice between you and Lily, and I cannot hesitate between the two."

He rose at the same moment and seized his hat.

"I give you fair warning," he continued; "I am going out to meet Culwarren, and to entreat him by every persuasion in my power to give up the gaming-tables altogether."

"And I give you fair warning," retorted Fosbrooke, "that you will repent your decision only once, but that will be *always*."

He lay back in his chair again, as the young fellow, whom he really loved, put his hat upon his head and passed out into the Italian sunshine. The room looked gloomier and more empty when he was gone, and Fosbrooke's heart felt emptier for the thought of the anticipated trouble. Anthony's interference at this juncture, if it proved of any avail, would make a serious difference in his exchequer. Fosbrooke's winnings and losings

were not matters of chance. He played on a scientific plan, which was all mapped out beforehand, and in which each move for apparent good, or evil, tended to bring about a certain consummation. He had commenced the practice of gambling for amusement or excitement, but he carried it on for a livelihood, and was as lustful over his winnings and as ferocious over his losses as a tigress deprived of her lawful prey.

He was not a dishonourable opponent, but he was a deadly one, and if he scorned to win a game by unfair means, he associated with men who had no such scruples, and were only too ready to take advantage of the timid play of such a tyro as Culwarren.

Yet Oliver Fosbrooke, though his blood was tingling at the idea of Anthony's opposition to his wishes, knew in his heart that the lad was right, and that he had honour and goodness on his side. But he had not been used to be bearded in his den. He was a man whom most men feared to quarrel with or offend; indeed, no one had ever gone so far with him as Anthony

Melstrom since the night he had taken his revolver out of his hand; but direct contradiction, and on such a subject, Fosbrooke could not brook even from him. He sat in the same position far into the afternoon, thinking of Anthony's words and working himself up into a rage concerning them, and then he rose and dressed himself, still moodily, and sauntered out to a neighbouring restaurant and took a lonely dinner, all the more lonely because the one who usually sat opposite to him, and was such excellent company, had left him with a scowl upon his brow.

Meanwhile, Anthony, who had waited long about the "Villa Pomona" for an interview with Culwarren, met him as he sallied forth in evening dress, with a light black cloth cape over his shoulders and his crush-hat in his hand, ready to keep an appointment to dine with Signor Braganza at Gordiani's.

"Culwarren," exclaimed Anthony, eagerly, as he descended the steps of the hotel, "I have been waiting here since three o'clock in the

hope of seeing you. Where are you off to so early?"

"I promised to meet Braganza at Gordiani's, and go with him to the opera afterwards. Why not come with us, Tony? I'll go round with you to your rooms, if you like, and wait while you dress. There's heaps of time."

"No, thanks, Cul, I've no heart for the play. I wanted particularly to have a long talk with you to-night. I have something serious to say to you. *Must* you meet Braganza?"

"*Must*, old boy. I have to settle up with the beggar for last night. He cleaned me out entirely, and he's rather importunate. What do you want to speak to me about? Money?"

"Yes, your own money, Cul."

"I don't understand you."

"I want you to break off your intimacy with Fosbrooke and Braganza and all that lot. I want you to give up going to the gaming-tables and their private card-parties. You are no match for them, Culwarren. You have lost more money than you can afford, and you are making your

mother unhappy and endangering your fortune and your good name. Be advised by me and give it up entirely from this date."

"And you talk to me like this," exclaimed the Earl in surprise; "you, who went hand in glove with Fosbrooke in introducing me to these men?"

"I know I did. I know also that I did wrong. I was still smarting under my life's misfortune, Culwarren, when we met again, and I cared nothing if others suffered as much as myself. I believed, too, that you had done me a bitter wrong. I thought you were married or at least engaged to Lily Osprey."

"And who says I am not?" demanded the Earl.

His voice and manner both changed. Anthony glanced up at him in surprise. But he was not going to deny his authority.

"Lily told me so herself. I saw her this morning," he replied, firmly. "I called at the hotel for that purpose."

"It is lucky my mother didn't catch you

skulking about," said Culwarren, in an unpleasant tone, "or she might have made things disagreeable for you."

"No one is better aware than myself *how* disagreeable Lady Culwarren can make things if she elects to do so," replied Anthony, "but she could hardly blame me for wishing to speak to the girl whom I regard as my future wife."

"She'll never be *that*, so the sooner you put the idea out of your head the better."

"I don't see the impossibility of it, and at any rate, the decision must eventually rest with the young lady herself, as she will soon be free to make her own choice in such matters."

"You extracted a promise from her to that effect this morning, I suppose?"

"She gave me the promise of her own free will. Come, Cul, don't look so glum about the matter. You are welcome to take her from me if you can. Let us have a fair field and no favour, and let the best man win. Is it a bargain?"

"I don't wish to discuss the subject. My mother desired you to leave Gardenholme, and to

think of Lily no more, and I am sure she would be exceedingly angry if she heard what had occurred. I must hurry on now, or Braganza will be waiting for me."

"Don't quarrel with me, Culwarren. I am only anxious for your welfare. Will you promise me not to play to-night?"

"On the contrary, I am engaged to more than one card-party. I really must decline to permit you to constitute yourself censor over my proceedings. After what you have told me regarding Miss Osprey, I do not believe in the disinterestedness of your motives. I prefer to judge for myself."

"You will regret it, I feel sure of that. These men are only using you as a tool to their own ends."

"And they are your *friends*. Suppose I repeat to them what you have said."

"You must do as you please about that. I tell it you for your good, Culwarren, and I cannot hesitate between their acquaintanceship and yours. Once more, I entreat you to give them up."

"Oh, to the d—l with your scruples and your advice. I want neither of them. This is some fad of Miss Osprey's which you have engaged to carry out. Well, she has chosen the wrong messenger. Had she come herself, with the consent I have long tried to extract from her in her hand, she might have pleaded with me successfully. As it is, tell her to confine herself to looking after you. *Au revoir.*"

And having arrived at Gordiani's restaurant, Lord Culwarren threw him a careless nod and disappeared. Anthony had been foiled at both points, but he was resolved to persevere. Since neither Fosbrooke nor Culwarren would listen to him, he determined to watch the play that went on that night, and if he detected any knavery, to expose it on the spot. He knew that such a course would be attended with a certain amount of danger, for an insulted Italian thinks nothing of pointing his arguments with his stiletto; but Anthony was not the sort of man to be frightened out of doing what he considered right. It seemed so hard that *both* his friends

should quarrel with him, and for such opposite causes.

When the usual time came for the guests to assemble at the Palazzo Ferrini, which was only another name for a well-known gambling-hell, he sauntered into the card-rooms and watched the players. It was not long before Lord Culwarren arrived, in company with his host Braganza and Fosbrooke, an Italian count called Vitozzi, and a Frenchman, Monsieur Degrande, one of the most notorious sharpers in Italy. They were all rather merry with wine, Culwarren and Braganza especially so, and they called for more liquor as they sat down at an unoccupied table and commenced to play baccarat. Culwarren soon spied out Anthony, and, apparently oblivious of their little difference, called to him loudly to come and join the game. But Anthony made some excuse for declining, although he loitered near the table and kept a sharp look-out upon the players. This seemed to annoy Fosbrooke, who declared that Anthony's fidgeting spoilt his play, and after a few broad hints, which were not attended to, he ordered him

sharply away from the table. Anthony opened his gray eyes at the insolence of the request, but refused to comply with it.

"On the contrary," he said, "since Lord Culwarren was kind enough to invite me, I will take a hand myself. I am interested in the extremely clever playing of Monsieur Degrande, and should like to take a lesson from him."

He slipped into a chair next to Degrande as he spoke, and professed to turn his attention entirely to the cards. Fosbrooke did not like either his manner or the tone of his voice. It foreboded evil, and he watched Anthony like a hawk watching a sparrow. But the young man never looked towards him. He kept his eyes fixed upon the cards. At last his opportunity occurred. Degrande won the game by a tremendous stroke of luck, which mainly consisted in making one of his cards disappear by sleight-of-hand up his sleeve. Anthony turned round suddenly and seized him with a grip of iron.

"Turn out that card, you scoundrel," he exclaimed; "you have cheated us."

At the sound of that word, every member of the club was astir and eagerly pressing forward to ascertain the truth of the accusation. Fosbrooke sprang to his feet, livid with passion, as Anthony shook the missing card out of the sleeve he held. But Degrande retained his seat, trembling like a leaf.

"Ah! you may well shake," cried the young man. "Culwarren, did I not tell you to beware of these men, and that you were only a tool in their hands, by which they might coin money? Each one of them will win from you, by fair means or foul, and divide the spoils amongst themselves."

Fosbrooke advanced upon Anthony threateningly.

"You idiot!" he hissed. "Be silent for your life!"

"My life? What is it worth to me? Culwarren, I beseech you again to *beware*."

"But of what?" exclaimed the Earl, who had had too much liquor to be quite clear what the disturbance meant.

"Of robbery."

At this assertion the guests began to murmur, but Anthony took no heed of them.

"Yes, you may resent the term," he said, "but I repeat it. I know this company. I know there is not a man amongst them all who would play fairly, unless he thought fair play would win."

"An insult! He has insulted us all!" exclaimed the company, in one breath.

"Take it as you please," retorted Anthony; "I am not afraid of your black looks. But I will save this gentleman, if it be possible, from further wrong."

"Do you understand what you are saying—do you realise what this must lead to? *Maniac!*" exclaimed Fosbrooke, striding up to him.

"No man better! Have *you* not been my teacher? I know you all, from first to last, for a dishonest crew. Take good heed of what I say, Culwarren!"

"Be silent!" yelled Fosbrooke.

"I will not be silent. I have been your accomplice. I am so no longer. If you have a grain of sense, Culwarren, or a spark of gentlemanly feeling, you will leave this company and never enter it again."

"What do you mean?" cried Fosbrooke.

"I mean that, under the guise of good fellowship, he has fallen into a nest of hornets, and that I will rescue him before he is stung to death."

"Then take the consequences, you bastard! You lie!"

At those cruelly insulting words Anthony Melstrom sprang at the elder man with the strength of an exasperated lion, and struck him with such force across the mouth that his own hand was covered with the blood of his so-called friend. Fosbrooke staggered back under the blow, which seemed to sober him like a sudden shock.

"This to *me*," he muttered.

"Yes, to you or any one," cried Anthony, passionately and loudly; "and to you first of all.

You are the man who dragged me down to this shameful degradation! *You*, with your cynicism and miserable sophistry, first hushed the voice of conscience in my heart, and tried to make me believe that self-respect was only self-deceit, and honour but a vapouring, empty word! You introduced me to this vile company, and appealed to my affection to trust you to ask me to do nothing wrong. Above all the rest, Fosbrooke, I denounce you before the world as a swindler and a cheat."

"You shall drink your cup of folly to the dregs," exclaimed Fosbrooke, in a voice of fury. "There can be but one answer to such words as yours. Have you forgotten that in this country such differences have but one mode of settlement? Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly. And I desire nothing better. Your life or mine. We cannot both live after such bitter insults have passed between us. Your weapons, time, and place?"

"Swords. I mean to *kill* you," cried Fosbrooke, with clenched teeth. "Time, now! Place,

the campagna at the back of Gordiani's. Gentlemen," he continued, turning to Comte Vitozzi and Signor Braganza, "you will oblige me by arranging this little affair at once. I will smoke a cigar whilst you fetch the necessary implements. I beg you will be as expeditious as possible. This unpleasant disturbance has somewhat fatigued me, and I shall be glad of my night's rest."

He lit a cigar as he spoke, and leaning nonchalantly against a pillar of the saloon, commenced to smoke.

Culwarren went up to Anthony, who remained quiet but resolute-looking, with a face white with alarm.

"Anthony," he whispered, "this must not—cannot be."

"Why not? You heard the man insult me. Am I to present the other cheek to him to be smitten? It is not in my nature. There is no help for it. The business must proceed."

The Earl looked infinitely distressed.

"You shall not sacrifice yourself for me," he said.

"If my death can save you from further ill, Culwarren, I shall at least not die in vain. But it is useless to try and turn me from my purpose. I could not draw back with honour. Would you disgrace me before all these scurvy foreigners?"

"But this is *my* quarrel. I dispute your right to meet the man. Let me take your place."

"No, no; that is impossible. Your life is valuable and dear to your mother and your friends, whilst mine is worthless as a grain of sand. Lily may regret me for a little while, but she is too young (thank God) to grieve for long. Leave me to my fate."

"But if you fall, Anthony, I shall be your murderer. Oh, what a fool I was not to listen to your advice this afternoon! I am the real cause of all this trouble."

He stared at Anthony for a few minutes in a sort of weak and irresolute fashion, and then, without preface or excuse, turned round and left the gaming-saloon.

Fosbrooke still leant against the pillar smoking,

with a cynical smile upon his lips, and Anthony, without one friend by his side to cheer or encourage him, felt as if he were forsaken both of God and man.

CHAPTER V.

THE DUEL.

WHEN Lord Culwarren stumbled blindly out of the Palazzo Ferrini it was with an idea of going for help; but he did not know where to go or whom to apply to. It was past twelve o'clock at night. All the quiet citizens of Florence were in bed and asleep; only the cafés, restaurants, and gaming-houses were open, and he was not likely to receive assistance from the *habitués* of such places. He felt half mad to think what might *not* happen for the need of a little promptitude. All his old affection for the youth who had been brought up as his brother revived with the idea of his danger, and the tears stood in his eyes as he rushed down the street, wondering what he could do to save him. In a moment, like a flash of

lightning, the thought of Miss Paget passed through his mind. How it came there he could never tell, but he felt at once that his best plan would be to go straight to her. She was a clever woman, used to think and plan for others, and had always been the chief adviser of the Culwarren family. As soon as he remembered this, the Earl quickened his pace in the direction of the "Hôtel Villa Pomona," and made his way, without ceremony, to the door of her private room. He knocked loudly and rapidly two or three times; but he need not have expended so much energy. The companion, like all who are acquainted with grief, was a light and nervous sleeper, and was alert and on her feet in a moment.

"Who is it?—what is it?" she demanded.

"It is I, Miss Paget — Culwarren. Can I speak to you on a matter of the greatest moment concerning Anthony?"

At that name the companion's face quailed, and she quickly enveloped herself in a dressing-gown and opened the door. The Earl gazed at her in astonishment. Her pale golden hair,

which she had always kept tucked away under her cap, fell in a luxuriant rippling mass below her waist. For a moment he forgot his mission.

"Miss Paget," he exclaimed, "I had no idea you had such lovely hair."

She flushed at the remark, but asked, hurriedly, "What of Anthony?"

"He is in the greatest danger. I hardly know how to tell you. He quarrelled with Fosbrooke, and Fosbrooke has challenged him. They are to meet immediately, and what chance will Anthony have against a practised swordsman? What am I to do? How can I prevent it?"

"Mr. Fosbrooke has challenged Anthony!" repeated the companion in a quivering voice. "My God! How terrible! When are they to meet, and where?"

"As soon as possible, and on the piece of waste campagna at the back of Gordiani's restaurant. But what am I to do? Miss Paget, for Heaven's sake advise me."

"Go at once to the gendarmerie, Culwarren, and entreat them to send some officer to prevent

the duel. Tell them who you are, your name will carry weight, and say Anthony is your brother. They may fear the English authorities. But lose no time. Go at once, for God's sake."

"I will run all the way," he replied; "I know the depôt, it is in the Strada Reale. I shall be there in five minutes."

And he rushed down the stairs again, and out into the open street. As he left her, Miss Paget's heart beat so violently she thought that she would faint. But she was not a woman to lose her consciousness when there was anything to be accomplished. With trembling fingers that could scarcely tie a string or settle a button, but with the resolute determination of a heroine, she rapidly arrayed herself in her walking apparel, and, in breathless haste, flew downstairs after Lord Culwarren. The sleepy concierge stared as he saw her pass through the door. For young gentlemen to run in and out of the "Villa Pomona" all night long was no unusual thing, but for an English lady to take a walk at one o'clock in the morning was quite a novelty. But Miss Paget

cared for nothing at that moment but to reach the campagna, and prevent the bloody tragedy. She knew she had but to reach it in time to be able to prevent it. But oh, the agony of feeling the moments fleeting by, and being too far off to make her presence known, or her voice heard.

"Which is the nearest way to Gordiani's?" she called out in Italian to a passer-by, but she never relaxed her pace to hear the answer, and he only stared at her for a mad woman, and went about his business. And still she flew down the principal thoroughfare, which she knew to be on the road to the restaurant, until she fell in with a guardian of the peace, whom she captured, to his amazement, as she passed, and bore along like a resistless torrent with her.

Meantime, Vitozzi and Braganza had returned to the Palazzo Ferrini, bearing the weapons with them, and soon after the melancholy *cortège* set out for the place of meeting. Anthony's seconds were two strangers, gentlemen who had been witnesses of the quarrel, and thirsted to aid the

young Englishman against his formidable opponent.

"I thank you, gentlemen," Anthony had said, in accepting their offer, "but seconds can be of little use to a man in a case like this; it is no question of fairness. My friend, Mr. Fosbrooke, will give me all the advantage in his power, but he knows that in any case I am no match for him, and that I am simply going out to die. Listen to what he is saying now."

"Yes, he was supposed to be the best swordsman in the Crimea," laughed Fosbrooke to Braganza; "but for all that, I had the misfortune to send him home invalided, just before Inkermann. They said he died of it, and if so, he was not the first who has had reason to rue my skill."

"Nor will he be the last," replied Braganza. "You have an easier task before you now. That young coxcomb will not stand up two minutes before your sword."

"I am afraid not. Poor boy! I feel quite sorry for him, but you are my witnesses, gentle-

men, that I had no alternative. It is impossible that any man should hear his best friends condemned as cheats and robbers, and pass over so gross an insult."

"Impossible!" they both replied.

"Let us set out, then, for the campagna. The time is getting on, and if the morning dawns we might be interrupted."

They walked briskly down the street, each man with a second on either side of him pressing for his last instructions or requests.

"I have nothing to ask of you, Braganza," said Fosbrooke, in a tone of forced merriment, "except to see that I have a cup of *café noir* as soon as the affair is over. Births, marriages, or funerals, it is all the same to me. I cannot do without my *petit verre* and *café noir*."

"You shall have them, my friend, never fear!" replied Braganza.

"And you, Monsieur Melstrom," urged one of the strangers, "have you no instructions to give this gentleman or myself? No message, or token, for your family or friends?"

"My family or friends!" repeated Anthony, bitterly. "Where are they? Did you not hear what that man called me—the foul epithet with which he taunted me? No, gentlemen, I have but one request to make. Let my grave be as nameless as myself."

As they reached the place of meeting they all stopped short, and Fosbrooke exclaimed:

"I see no reason to waste any more time. I conclude that Mr. Melstrom, like myself, has settled his affairs, so let us proceed to business. Vitozzi, the weapons!"

"Can there be no apology, Monsieur Fosbrooke?" said Vitozzi, as he handed him the swords. "It is but a youth—too unworthy an antagonist for a man of your reputation. There will be no credit in such a victory. Could you not suggest a retractation?"

"Certainly," replied Fosbrooke, "but I do not think he will accede to it. You shall see. Mr. Melstrom, my friends are desirous that I should give you one more chance. They suggest you are rather too feeble a quarry for a practised

sword like mine. Will you retract your words, then — say you are sorry for your unfounded insults, and persuade Culwarren to return to us?"

"No!" said Anthony, firmly, "I will not."

"Your obstinacy is likely to lead to fatal results. Remember, it is a case of life or death. Think once more. Yes or no — what is your answer?"

"You have received it," replied Anthony, "and I have nothing more to say to you."

"Then take the consequences," said Fosbrooke, as he handed the two swords to him.

Anthony took one of them mechanically, and fell back into his place. Fosbrooke turned suddenly away, and commenced fumbling in the pocket of his coat, as though he had lost something.

"What is the matter?" cried Braganza, rushing up to him. "Have you dropped anything? What are you looking for?"

"Nothing. Hold my coat for me, and leave me to myself," replied Fosbrooke, roughly. "Oh,

my God!" he thought, "what is that *something* in his face that reminds me so powerfully of the past? Can it be a dim recollection of what my own features used to look like before the world, the flesh, and the devil had stamped their mark upon them? I wish he had apologised. Bah! what am I thinking of? He has had the opportunity and rejected it. If he is resolved to die it's not my fault. Gentlemen," he continued, turning to all concerned, "I am ready."

The combatants put themselves into position, and the duel began. Anthony Melstrom, for so young a man, was not a bad swordsman. He had had a good deal of practice at fencing, and had made considerable progress in the art under Fosbrooke's own tuition; added to which he was young and nimble, and had plenty of nerve and a steady eye. But his heart was not in his work to-night, although his life depended on it, and the opportunities which he would have seized had he been fencing for pleasure now passed by unheeded, for he could not forget all through that it was Fosbrooke — *his friend* — who was

opposed to him, and that they were in bitter earnest, and a successful thrust from his blade meant death to his companion. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that, with his senses wandering, he was soon overcome. But a few passes had taken place between them when he felt Fosbrooke's sword pass into his side, and after one attempt to keep on his feet, fell heavily to the ground. His seconds were at his side in a moment, and one of them knelt down and tore open his shirt.

"He is badly wounded, monsieur. I am not sure if he is alive," he exclaimed, hurriedly. "We must take him away at once."

"Have you a carriage?" asked Vitozzi.

"Yes; we called one in passing, and ordered it to wait outside the restaurant."

"Fetch it at once, then. It would be dangerous to carry him to it. He is bleeding violently."

One of the seconds ran off at once, and Fosbrooke, who had been coolly wiping his sword, walked up to where Anthony lay, and

stood gazing at him. The gentleman who supported the young man's unconscious form glanced upwards, and hardly recognised the face of his antagonist, so changed had it become since Anthony Melstrom fell.

"I never dreamed that it would really come to *this*," he muttered. "And I *loved* him so. A curse upon my skilled right hand! Butcher that I am!"

"Yes, *butcher!*" cried a voice beside him.

He turned in astonishment, to behold Miss Paget, who, with a wildly excited face, threw herself on her knees beside the prostrate Anthony, whilst the gendarme she had brought with her stood apart and demanded particulars of the affair from the seconds.

"Good God! Diana! *You* here!" exclaimed Fosbrooke, in a tone of terror, as he fell backward.

"Where else should I be?" she cried. "Man, do you know what you have done?"

"If you mean *this*," said Fosbrooke, looking sadly down on Anthony, "the poor lad brought

it on himself. He insulted me, and there was no alternative. I wish to Heaven there had been. I would do much to bring him back again."

"And was there no pity in your murderous heart then," she exclaimed, "for one so young and friendless? Did no voice of Nature call out to you to stop your sacrilegious hand? Arthur, your heart has never known remorse, but it shall know it now. As surely as we three shall stand before the judgment seat of God, the boy your guilty hand has now struck down *is your own son!* Oh, Anthony! Oh, Anthony!"

She bent herself sobbing above the form of the unconscious stripling, while Fosbrooke's sword fell from his hand upon the ground with a sharp clang.

"*My* son!" he gasped, "*your* son! Great Heaven! Is this the retribution for my wasted life?"

He knelt down beside her, and tried to take the limp, dead hand in his, but she pushed him

away, with a look of the deepest antipathy and scorn.

"Stand off. Don't presume to touch him, my darling, of whom you have been the curse from his birth until now. How dare you put your murderous hands on him, or me — your equal victims!"

"Oh! stop! stop!" he cried, "don't reproach me more than my unhappy conscience is already doing. How did I know? How could I tell? My poor boy, of whose existence, even, I was unaware. Oh, Diana! have mercy on me, for God has none."

"Hush! Here is Lord Culwarren. For *his* sake and for mine, not another word. This night's work has parted us, not only for time, but for eternity."

The foreigners who surrounded them, but had not understood a word of the conversation, which was carried on in English, now fell back to make way for Lord Culwarren and the chef de police, who came quickly forward, followed by the cumbersome vetturino jolting over the

uneven ground. The Earl made his way at once to Anthony's side, by which Miss Paget was sobbing bitterly.

"So I am too late," he said, "and my poor boy has fallen. Oh, Miss Paget, don't give way so terribly. Surely you do not apprehend the worst."

"I do not know, Culwarren. I am afraid to think. But we must have a surgeon at once."

"There is one on the ground. This gentleman fetched him. Let him come and do what he can."

The surgeon advanced, placed his hand on Anthony's heart, turned his handsome face, now white as marble, to the lantern light, and shook his head ominously.

"A very dangerous wound. I fear internal hæmorrhage," he said in Italian. "This gentleman must not be moved further than possible. Where is his home?"

"In the Plaza Corente."

"That is much too far. He will die if he

cannot have complete rest and quiet. The shaking of that vehicle would kill him. We must carry him to the nearest house that will accommodate him."

"*Which* is the nearest?" demanded Miss Paget, with forced calmness.

"Gordiani has sleeping accommodation over the restaurant," suggested the Earl.

"That will do nicely," said the surgeon. "If one of you gentlemen will run on in front and wake them up, and say that Il dottore Maceno is about to bring a patient there, they will bestir themselves. And now what have we large enough to form a litter to carry him in?"

"My cloak," exclaimed Miss Paget, tearing it off.

"But the morning air is cold. Madame will feel the want of her cloak," said the surgeon, politely.

She shook her head sadly. All her attention was riveted on the silent form before her. The surgeon temporarily staunched the flow of blood, but forbore to make any further examination till

the patient had been moved. In a few minutes the messengers returned with the news that the bed was ready, and lifting Anthony in the cloak as in a hammock, they bore him slowly and silently into the Restaurant Gordiani. When he was laid upon the bed, and the difficult task of undressing him had been accomplished, and the surgeon was making a more particular examination, Culwarren drew Miss Paget aside.

"This has been a terrible ordeal for you, Miss Paget, and no fit scene for a woman, but you are not made of ordinary stuff, and I know how you loved Tony in the days gone by. Whatever happens, it will be a consolation to you to think you came. But for your forethought, he might have laid and died out on the campagna. A curse upon that fellow Fosbrooke for bringing the poor boy to such a plight."

"Heaven's bitterest curse," she added, solemnly, "and it will follow him, never fear!"

"Did you speak to him?"

"A few words and not of the pleasantest, as you may imagine. Don't talk of it. I feel

as if I had witnessed some butchery at the shambles."

"You are strangely unnerved, Miss Paget. Would you prefer to go home?"

"Home, Culwarren, and with his life trembling in the balance! What are you thinking of? Hush! the surgeon has finished his examination. Let us prepare ourselves for the worst."

She straightened her figure as he approached, as though she were making ready to receive a volley of bullets in her devoted breast.

"The truth!" she gasped. "Tell us the whole truth!"

"Is madame related to monsieur?" demanded the surgeon, gravely.

"Yes! No! A friend. Have known him from a child," she stammered in reply.

"I must prepare madame for grave results. The sword-thrust is very near the vitals. The hæmorrhage is extensive—so will, possibly, the weakness and the inflammation be. If monsieur's constitution can stand the shock and the loss of

blood, it will stand anything," said the surgeon, shrugging his shoulders.

"You mean that he is dying?" interposed Culwarren, in a tone of apprehension.

"No, milor; not necessarily so. But his life depends upon the attention he receives. As soon as he recovers consciousness he must be watched every moment, day and night, till he is out of danger. He must have a first-rate nurse — untiring, indefatigable. Milor had better send for a *sœur de charité*. I shall require her assistance in resuscitating monsieur."

"I will send to the hospital at once," said Culwarren, turning away; but Miss Paget detained him.

"No, Culwarren. This is *my* charge, and I am going to undertake it."

"You! But it may detain you here for weeks. What will my mother say?"

"I hope she may express nothing but approval of my action; but I cannot wait for her consent. My duty is here, and I mean to remain. I shall

not stir hence till Anthony is on his feet again or—or——"

She could not finish the sentence, but turned away and disencumbered herself of her walking attire.

"Now, signor," she said to the doctor, "I am ready to attend you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH.

WHEN Lord Culwarren, hollow-eyed and anxious-looking, appeared at the breakfast-table of the "Villa Pomona" the following morning to give an account of the proceedings the night before, the Countess's indignation at the part Miss Paget had played in them knew no bounds. For the first time, perhaps, during their acquaintance she spoke of her companion as a dependent rather than a friend.

"I never heard of anything so uncalled-for or so indelicate in my life before," she exclaimed. "Fancy an educated and respectable woman rushing through the streets of a strange city in the middle of the night to interpose herself in a gentlemen's quarrel! It was most unseemly, not to say presumptuous. What right had Miss

Paget to absent herself without leave, and to stay away in order to befriend an enemy of mine? She must have lost her senses."

"Come, come, mother, you cannot call poor Anthony your *enemy*. Whatever his shortcomings may have been, they were not directed against *you*," replied the Earl.

"Excuse me, Culwarren, but I differ from you. What do you call leading *you* into every sort of vice and dissipation but being inimical to myself? I have to thank Mr. Melstrom for a great deal of discomfort since I came to Florence."

"Well, at all events, you can afford to forgive him now, mother, for it was in attempting to save me from the scoundrels, by whom I was surrounded, that he got what may chance to prove his death-blow."

"Nonsense, Culwarren. There is nothing I dislike so much as exaggeration. Young men don't die so easily, and I cannot believe that Mr. Fosbrooke would give him more than a prick, just to punish his presumption. I hope it will

teach him better manners. But all this has nothing to do with Miss Paget's sentimental folly. When did she say she should return?"

"I don't think she intends to return at all—that is, until Anthony is out of danger. I went over the first thing this morning to hear how he was going on, and although conscious he is very weak, and allowed to see no one."

"And Miss Paget did not say how soon I might expect her back?" exclaimed the Countess, in surprise.

"No; only her love, and she may not be able to leave her patient for days, or weeks, and trusts you will think she is doing right in staying to nurse him."

"But I *don't* think she is doing right; I think she is altogether wrong," cried Lady Culwarren, angrily. "Pray, what am *I* to do without her? Does she ever consider that? Here has she been with me for the last fifteen years, never separated for a single day, until I have learned to depend on her for everything, and then she deserts me at a moment's notice, and without so much as

asking my leave. But that is the worst of Miss Paget, she is so sentimental. I have often found fault with her for it. Going about with a tragedy-queen face, when she had everything she could possibly desire, and bringing the tears into her eyes over a piece of music or poetry. It's all affectation; and so is her quixotic idea of nursing this wretched boy, who is no relation to any one of us."

"But who was always brought up like one, until three months ago," said Lily Osprey.

Her remark turned the attention of her aunt and cousin in her direction. She had been too shocked to give more than a frightened gasp as the news of Anthony's danger reached her, but now they saw that her eyes were anxiously fixed upon Lord Culwarren, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Culwarren!" she sobbed, "tell Miss Paget how good and kind I think she is, and how much I should like to help her nurse him back to convalescence. Poor dear Anthony!"

The Countess put her gold *pince-nez* up to her

eyes, and regarded her niece with the utmost disdain.

"And what is the reason for this *exposé*?" she demanded, coolly.

"It means, Aunt Emily, what you have known long ago," replied the girl, with sudden courage, "that I love Anthony, and consider myself his affianced wife. He came to see me here yesterday morning, whilst you were at Abruzzio, and we exchanged rings and renewed our promise to marry each other, and I will never, *never* give him up again," she ended, with a burst of tears.

"Very pretty, very pretty indeed!" said Lady Culwarren, sarcastically; "quite a little picture. I came to Florence at an enormous expense to give pleasure to my niece and companion, and they reward me by flying in my face and adopting the cause of this very objectionable person, whom duty compelled me to banish from my house. It is an inducement, certainly, to any one to continue to do good to their fellow-creatures."

Then her sarcastic mood changed, and she flew into an intolerant passion.

"But I will have no more of this nonsense, Lily, on your part, at all events. I have no absolute control over the actions of Miss Paget, although after this overt rebellion and absolute disregard of my known wishes, I shall never be able to regard her in the same light again. I am very sorry now that I ever came to Florence. If I had done as my conscience dictated to me, I should have left the city as soon as ever I found that young man was here. But I will not stay another day within its precincts; *that*, at all events, is in my power. So go and tell Prescott to pack all our travelling trunks to start by the night mail for England; and, Culwarren, you will be good enough to settle the bills and inform the landlord of our intentions."

Having delivered herself of which exordium, the Countess shook out her skirts with indignation and walked out upon the balcony. But Lily's courage broke down under this terrible prospect. She clung to her cousin's hand, sobbing, as she exclaimed:

"Oh, Culwarren! don't let Aunt Emily start

so soon. Persuade her to stay here for a few days longer—just till we know how Anthony is going on. If he were to—to—*die* without my seeing him again, my heart would break—indeed, indeed it would."

"Do you love him so *very* much, then, Lily?" said the Earl, in a dejected tone. "But sorrow makes us selfish."

"I love him better than my life," she answered, as she rose hastily and left the room.

The Earl joined his mother on the balcony.

"Are you really determined to return to England so soon?" he asked.

"Perfectly so. Do you wish to give up all your chances with that girl? You see the fool she is making of herself over young Melstrom. The sooner she is out of it all the better."

"But won't people talk if we leave the city at this juncture, mother? Melstrom's story is pretty well known by this time, and if this wound should turn out to be fatal, our names may get connected with it in an unpleasant manner."

"I don't agree with you; but since Miss

Paget is determined to stay and nurse him, the world will think I left my own companion behind in charge of him, and it could hardly expect me to do more for a young man who has no claims on me."

"I have understood you to say you suspect he *has* a claim."

"Do you mean through your father?" asked Lady Culwarren, sharply.

"I do," replied the Earl.

"I don't recognise the claim, then. I look upon the whole affair as a most impudent—not to say indecent — attempt to secure my maternal solicitude for a child who should never have crossed my sight."

"Did you love my father?" asked her son.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the Countess, turning round upon him. "Have you ever heard that I failed in my duty as a wife?"

"Never. But duty does not always include affection. And I should have thought that had you *loved* him, you must, in some measure, have felt interested in one whom you believe to be his

son. Mother, take my advice and remain in Florence until Anthony is, at all events, pronounced out of danger."

"I shall do no such thing. I have made up my mind to start this evening. I am longing to get back to Gardenholme."

"Then let me stay behind to look after him and Miss Paget."

"Leave you in this nest of vipers, who have already robbed you of half your income?"

"Mother, I promise you I will never touch a card again. I have had too severe a lesson. Anthony's death may be the result of my folly."

"And you would let me and your cousin travel back to England with no better protection than a lady's-maid and a courier, Culwarren? You should be ashamed to make such a proposition. Certainly *not*. You will go with us. *One* of my family is quite sufficient to sacrifice in such a cause."

The Earl sighed, but made no further remonstrance. He was weak-minded, and from his birth he had been used to bend his will to the

stronger one of his mother. And as for poor Lily, what could she do? She was entirely dependent on her aunt for protection and support. She was like a pliant reed in her hands. Only sometimes even a reed will be found strong enough to resist the force of the river-tide, whilst it seems to sway beneath it. She listened to the Countess's fiat with many tears, which enabled her, with every show of truth, to plead a headache by the afternoon, when her aunt usually required her to read her to sleep, and sit by her till she waked again. This afternoon, however, whilst Lady Culwarren slumbered, and Miss Paget kept watch beside her patient, a light tap was heard against the chamber door. Anthony was now conscious, but in the greatest danger, and the doctor who attended him said it might, and would probably be, weeks before he could pronounce him to be safe. He required the most constant watching and attention. Not a sound was to reach his ears to startle or annoy him—not an allusion to be made to the past, that could have the power to call up an unpleasant recollection. Miss Paget had

secured the services of a *sœur de charité* to help her in her task, yet she never left the bedside herself, but sat there like a statue, dumb and motionless, until she saw that she could do something for her helpless charge. Anthony had not yet seemed to recognise her. Although his eyes were open, and he took his medicine or food as it was offered him, he had not spoken, and an occasional groan was all the proof he gave that he was conscious. The wound in his side was a terrible gash, that had glanced by and only just missed the vitals, and the fever that had supervened was very high. Miss Paget was just wondering sadly if he would ever be restored to her, when that light tap came upon the door. Rising noiselessly, she encountered the *sœur de charité*, who informed her that "un milor—très grand et assez beau," and "une petite demoiselle, si belle, si belle," were waiting to see her below. Miss Paget guessed at once who they must be, and leaving the *sœur de charité* in her place, ran down to meet Lord Culwarren and Lily Osprey.

"You mustn't keep me a moment," she

exclaimed as she folded Lily in her arms. "He is very, *very* ill, darling, and we don't know in the least how it will turn out, and I dare not leave his side. Oh, Lily, Lily! this is a terrible ending to his young life—blighted from the beginning to the close."

"Miss Paget, he will not *die*," said Lily, with a scared face.

"I don't know, dear, but I fear the worst. Pray for him as you would for your brother. He needs all our prayers."

"Dear Miss Paget," said Culwarren, taking her hand, "we feel for you as much as for ourselves. We know that Tony was always your favourite."

"Struck down in this terrible way—murdered —*butchered*," she said, bitterly. "It makes one shudder to think of it. But I must not give way. He wants me, and—I am his only friend."

"Not his *only* friend, dear," whispered Lily, "but the only one who is allowed to help him. We came to tell you that Aunt Emily insists upon returning to England to-night, and taking us with her. Culwarren and I would gladly stay behind—

you know we would—and help you nurse dear Anthony, but she is resolute. She *will* go, and we are obliged to go with her."

"Lady Culwarren is going to leave Florence while the life of this boy, whom she reared as her own child, is trembling in the balance. She wants no better proof, at all events, that *she* is not his mother," said Miss Paget, indignantly.

"He wants none, Miss Paget, while he has *you*," remarked the Earl. "But it is true. My mother refuses to listen to reason, and so I brought Lily round to see you and to say good-bye."

"Oh, Miss Paget, can't I see *him*?" said the girl, sobbing. "Only just for a moment."

"No, no. Certainly not. No one. Not a soul shall go near him. The doctor forbids it," replied the companion, with a suddenly awakened ferocity which neither of them had ever noticed in her before; and then she added, in a softer tone: "I am sorry, dear Lily. I know you love him, but it would be dangerous, and he would not be able to speak to you."

"Oh! you will nurse him very, *very* tenderly,

will you not?" cried the unhappy girl. "You will see he wants for nothing, and if money is needed, Culwarren says you must apply to him."

"Of course," added the Earl. "And don't forget, Miss Paget, that I regard Anthony as my brother, and treat him in all respects as though he were so."

A new pride seemed to beam from the companion's eyes.

"Thank you, Lord Culwarren," she replied. "If I want money I will write to you for it. But you know that I am not without funds of my own, thanks to your dear father's provision; and since the Countess has discarded him"—with a nervous laugh—"I look upon Tony as a kind of adopted son, and mean to treat him as such."

"Have you heard the news of Fosbrooke?" demanded the Earl.

A shudder ran through her frame. "Don't mention that man to me," she said. "His very name is detestable."

"True, but I thought you might like to know that you are not likely to come across him again.

He has left Florence. He, with Braganza and Vitozzi, were too much afraid to wait the results of the duel, and got away early this morning—no one knows where. Let us hope he will never cross our path again."

"I hope it with all my heart," said Miss Paget; "but I must go now, or he may miss me. Good-bye, Culwarren. God bless you, dear Lily. Don't fret too much for leaving Florence. You could be of no use here. But pray for those you leave behind you."

She hurried upstairs again, and all they had to do was to return to the hotel and commence their preparations for the journey. It was a very sad and silent one. Lily wept incessantly until her aunt declared that she was sick of the sight of her, and Lord Culwarren was wrapt in gloom. And when they arrived in Gardenholme things seemed to get worse instead of better. The old Abbey looked dull and empty without Anthony or Miss Paget, and the loss of the latter was felt each hour of the day. She had promised to send them frequent bulletins concerning her patient, but they

were most unsatisfactory. Anthony made the very slowest progress. In a few days he had sufficiently recovered to recognise Miss Paget, and to learn why he and she were staying at Gordiani's restaurant together; but the wound remained obstinately painful and inflamed, and the extent of the internal injuries had never been accurately ascertained, and the weakness was so extreme that the young man lay like a helpless child in his nurse's arms. Sometimes one of them even thought that he had been given back to her by Heaven like this as a slight compensation for the loss she had sustained in never having been allowed to cherish him in infancy, and she would sit with the fair head pillowed on her shoulder or her knee, smoothing the bright hair and cooling the feverish forehead till something of the same idea seemed to enter the mind of Anthony, as he caught her hand and held it to his lips.

"How good you are to me, Miss Paget, and what a tiresome baby I have been for the last few weeks! If you had been my mother, you could not have nursed me more tenderly. How can I

ever thank you for your kindness to a poor waif and stray like I am?"

"You are not a waif and stray to me, Anthony. You are the dear child to whom I taught his first letters—his first prayer. I shall always be glad to remember that."

"And from the use I have made of your instruction, Miss Paget, I'm afraid you have no reason to be proud of your pupil."

"I think I shall be proud of him yet, Anthony. Will not this serious illness—this near approach to death — make you more careful in the future? You have had a very narrow escape, my dear! You will not re-enter life to abuse your opportunities again, I hope."

"Ah, Miss Paget, what opportunities shall I ever have? You forget I am no longer at Gardenholme. Nothing belongs to me — not even my name. I can never be anything but a rogue and a vagabond. If I had money, perhaps—but you see I have none. Sometimes I think I was wrong to refuse the provision the late Earl made for me."

"I think you were. Yet I would not have your pride wounded for all the world. Listen to me, Anthony. For reasons of his own, we were both especial charges of the late Lord Culwarren. He left me money also in his will, which I have had no need of, for the Countess has always made me a liberal allowance. Now tell me what you would do if you had money."

"I would emigrate to America—leave all these hateful surroundings and recollections behind me—and try my luck in a new world, where no man would know the misfortune of my birth, or, knowing it, would like me the less for what is, after all, no fault of mine. Then I should have put temptation out of my way. I should know these men who enticed me on to follow their example no more, and I should be earning a fortune wherewith to come back in a few years' time and marry Lily Osprey."

The companion sighed.

"You are still hankering after her," she said.

"I love her more than ever, Miss Paget. I think it is my love for her that has drawn me back

to life. I cannot leave this world while it holds so much for me."

"Anthony, if this is really your wish, you shall accomplish it. I have more money laid by than would suffice to start you in the New World, and it is all at your service."

"*Your* money, Miss Paget? Oh, no! that would be impossible. What, take your savings? Suppose I lost or squandered them, I should never be able to repay your generosity."

"You will not lose them, I read it in your face; and if you did, I am provided for, for life. Only promise me one thing, Anthony—that if ever you become rich enough to marry Lily, you will let me have a corner in your home, that I may nurse your little children, as I never had the happiness of nursing *you*—my dear, dear boy."

"Why, Miss Paget, are you crying? Am I worse than I imagine? Do you think that I shall never be able to go to America or anywhere except the English burying-ground?"

"No, no, dear boy. Don't talk to me like that. Dr. Maceno says you are really making

progress. But you are very weak still, Tony, and you must be careful and not excite yourself, or you may have a relapse. Lie down again now, and let me fetch you some soup. You have had nothing for two hours."

"I wish *you* would lie down, Miss Paget, and have some sleep. Your eyes are quite red for want of it. I don't believe you have been in bed once since my accident occurred."

"Never mind, Tony. I have learned to do without it, and I shall have plenty of time to sleep and rest by-and-by."

Were her words prophetic? The anxious watchers at Gardenholme felt their hopes decrease day by day, as the letters from Florence, which were at first so cheerful, became more and more depressed. The fatal wound seemed to make no progress—the fatal weakness to yield to no cure, till, after weeks of anxiety and miserable suspense, Lord Culwarren was hardly surprised to receive a few hurriedly written lines from Miss Paget, which said:

"My melancholy duty here is over. Anthony

is gone from us. We must bear it as best we may. Break the news as gently as you can to poor Lily, and tell Lady Culwarren that I shall be back at Gardenholme as soon as ever the journey can be accomplished."

CHAPTER VII.

THE EARL PROPOSES.

IT was summer again at Gardenholme. Nearly twelve months had elapsed since the letter had arrived from Florence with the fatal news of Anthony Melstrom's death, and to all outward appearance the old Abbey was just the same as it had ever been. The flower gardens were in their utmost beauty, and the domestic arrangements were in perfect order, and Miss Paget moved through the house as usual, controlling and overlooking all its internal mechanism until it went upon greased wheels. Yet there was a difference at Gardenholme, and a very marked one, and no one felt it more than Lady Culwarren. She was even afraid to invite guests to the Abbey, lest they

should be infected by the general depression. The Earl was not the same man he had been. He was haunted by the idea that he had been the provocative cause of his adopted brother's death, and seemed to have lost all interest in his property, and all ambition to mix in the political world. The Countess had fondly hoped that, all obstacles being now permanently removed, his cousin Lily and he would make a match of it, and that the duties and pleasures of marriage would divert Culwarren's thoughts from the past. But Lily Osprey was worse than he was. She went about the house like a little ghost, quiet and uncomplaining, but with scarcely a smile to be seen on her face, and had become addicted to getting away by herself on every possible occasion, and sitting alone brooding upon her thoughts of Anthony. Miss Paget begged the Countess not to be uneasy. She assured her the fit of melancholy would pass from both of them, and that it was the natural horror of youth at the idea of death and separation. Yet the months went by and their moods remained the same, until Lady Culwarren lost

patience with their long faces and silent company. One morning she was writing letters at her own little escritoire in the drawing-room, when Lily sat down to the piano and began to play a plaintive air by Schumann. The Countess tapped her foot on the floor for some time with impatience, and finally burst forth in complaint.

"My dear Lily, if you can't find something a little more cheerful to amuse me with than that doleful ditty, I wish you'd close the instrument. It gives one the blues to listen to you. Why don't you play some dance music or sing me one of your merry old songs?"

Lily rose and left the piano.

"I can't sing, Aunt Emily," she answered, wearily, "and I thought you would like that piece of Schumann's. I am so fond of it."

"The poor man must have been very wretched when he wrote it, that's all that I can say," retorted Lady Culwarren, "and I'm sure we don't want to be made more miserable than we are. What has come to this place I can't imagine. We used to be a very happy family party at one

time, and now I see nothing but long faces and lugubrious looks."

"We have had such a dreary winter," said Lily, taking up her work.

"Dreary indeed! And when we have nothing but clouds inside the house as well as outside, the effect becomes almost intolerable."

"It does, indeed," acquiesced her niece, with a heavy sigh.

"Yes, but I won't stand it any longer," exclaimed the Countess, angrily. "I've had enough of all this nonsense. Whose fault is it, pray, except yours and that of my foolish Culwarren, whom you encourage in his folly?"

"How do I encourage it, Aunt Emily?"

"In every way. Why should you both consider it necessary, for instance, to intensify the gloom by wearing perpetual mourning?"

"We wear it in remembrance of one whom we both dearly loved," replied the girl, indignantly.

"I know perfectly well that you are wearing it for that wretched boy who was killed in a drunken brawl at Florence—a person who was no relation

to you whatever, and whose very existence you should make it your duty to forget. Miss Paget doesn't offend my sight in this indelicate manner. I was very angry with Miss Paget at the time, and thought her most ill-advised to act as she did. Still, since she returned to us, she has never obtruded the offensive subject on me, nor has she made any alteration in her dress. In *this* respect she has paid far more attention to my wishes than either you or Culwarren."

"But Miss Paget has always worn black," remonstrated Lily. "Besides, she may have been fond of Anthony, but he was not—he *could* not —have been to her what he was to Culwarren and to me."

"Oh, please spare me any rodomontade on the subject, Lily, for it offends my fastidiousness to a degree. Young ladies were not permitted to display their preference for gentlemen quite so openly in my time. And to wear mourning for any one who was not a connection would have been considered indelicate. Society very properly only allows the display of sorrow under certain well-defined regu-

lations. You are absolutely demoralising to all of us. Culwarren, too, is in a constant state of low spirits, *ennuyé* with everything. But that is as much *your* fault as that of any one else, Lily, and so I have always told you. You have it in your power to cheer and comfort my son, but you are so selfish you won't do it."

"Aunt Emily," said Lily, who was struggling with her rebellious tears, "I would laugh and be light-hearted if I could, but it seems impossible."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear," replied the Countess; "you could do *anything* if you set your mind to it. How do you suppose people could live and be happy if they were always thinking of the past? Look at me. See the troubles I've had. First I lost your poor mother, my dear sister Ada, then the Earl went and left me a miserable widow, and then I am told that the boy I had brought up as my own son was—— But there, that is a matter I cannot discuss before you. Thank Heaven! it is all over and done with."

"Oh, aunt! oh, aunt! how cruel you can be!" cried Lily, sobbing.

"There you go again. Really, my dear, one would think that I had joined the majority, to see your lamentations," said Lady Culwarren. "Ah! here comes my boy. I hope he will tell you you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

The young Earl sauntered in from the garden through the open French window and threw himself languidly into a chair.

"Well, Culwarren," exclaimed his mother, briskly, "and what are you going to do this morning?"

"I don't know and I don't care," replied the Earl.

"What a very childish answer! I am surprised at you making it. You *ought* to know, and you *ought* to care. Why don't you take Lily for a ride? You might go and call on the Ashetons together."

"Oh, I *hate* riding," said Culwarren.

"And I detest calling," added his cousin.

"Really, this is unbearable," cried the Countess, starting from her seat. "I do all in the world I can think of to make you happy and contented,

and all the reward I get for it is grumbling. What has come to both of you? What is the meaning of this miserable change?"

"You know perfectly well," replied Culwarren, "so why need you ask? How often will you wring my heart by compelling me to answer? The remembrance of that dreadful affair at Florence haunts me day and night. I cannot get it out of my mind. I feel that I am my brother's murderer. I shall feel so till I join him in the other world."

"But this is madness—infatuation, Culwarren. Is the Abbey never to be anything but a house of mourning, just because an unfortunate youth happens to meet his death in consequence of his own headstrong folly?"

"Say rather in consequence of your son's headstrong vice, mother," remarked the Earl, sadly.

"I shall say no such thing. No words of mine shall encourage your ridiculous scruples. However, as Miss Osprey and you appear to be so much of one mind, I will leave you to keep each

other company," said the Countess, as she prepared to leave the room. "It really seems a pity," she added, with an affected laugh, "that, as you agree so well, you cannot make a match of it, and indulge each other with lugubrious reminiscences to your lives' end. What a cheerful establishment yours would be!" And so she disappeared.

"My mother has no heart," said the Earl, as the door closed upon her. "I don't suppose she ever loved anybody as you and I loved Tony."

"Perhaps not, or she would be more patient with our trouble. But Miss Paget encourages her to try and laugh us out of it. I heard her do so. Culwarren, don't you think that Miss Paget's behaviour is very strange sometimes? At Florence she seemed so overcome with grief at dear Tony's danger, you might almost have thought that he was the dearest thing in all the world to her, and see how long and devotedly she nursed him. And yet, now that he is gone, she hardly seems to care. She has returned to her old cold and reserved manner, and always changes the subject when you want to speak of *him*."

"I have observed it, Lily, frequently. When I felt able to mention the subject, I was anxious to hear all I could about poor Tony's death and burial, but I found her strangely reticent. She told me positively nothing, until I proposed to go to Florence myself and erect a memorial over his grave, and then she begged me not to do so, and said it was Tony's last wish that his resting-place should be as nameless as himself. Poor fellow! if he had lived, how hard I would have tried to make up to him for the insult and degradation he passed through!"

"I am sure you would," said Lily, stretching out her little hand to clasp that of her cousin, "and, thank Heaven, where he is gone no reproach will ever be cast at him on that score again. Culwarren, if ever I am my own mistress, my first pilgrimage will be to see his grave. I feel as if it would ease my grief so much to be able to cry over it."

The Earl drew his chair a little closer to hers.

"Lily, dear," he commenced, "a year ago my mother very nearly worried you into promising

to be my wife. I was very anxious to marry you then—very much in love with you, I suppose people would say—but Anthony's sad fate drove it all out of my head. In the first place, I could not bear to think of laying my hand on what he had considered his; in the second, I did not believe there was any hope for me."

"No, Culwarren, there is no hope. It is kinder to tell you so before you go any further," replied Lily.

"Stop a minute, dear; hear me to the end. I am quite aware that you will never love me as you loved Anthony. If you could not do it whilst he was alive, far less would it be in your power now that he is dead. You would feel so very faithless. But suppose I neither expect nor ask you for that sort of love; suppose I am just content with what you can give me—the ordinary affection of a cousin—don't you think you could marry me then?"

Lily shook her head.

"It will be very sad for you to live all your life alone, Lily. Now you have my mother and

Miss Paget to look after you, but in the ordinary course of events they will go before you do, and then you will have no near relation but myself. Don't you think we should be happier together? I don't think my love would worry you—I am too sad myself for that; but I would take you anywhere you wished to go—even to that grave, dear, where my sorrow would be just as great and far more self-reproachful, than your own. You would never need to fear, Lily, that *I* would find fault with you for mourning Anthony too much."

"Dear Culwarren, I am sure you would not, and the genuine grief you have shown for his loss has endeared you to me more than anything else could have done. I would do almost anything for you, Culwarren. I would be your companion, your housekeeper, your nurse. I would love your wife and your children (if you ever had such ties) dearly, but I cannot marry you. Listen, and I will tell you why. Had Anthony been all right—you know what I mean—if he had had a father and mother who were proud

of him to weep his loss and cherish his memory, I *might*, perhaps, when my first grief was over, have turned gratefully to you for affection and comfort. But he was so much alone. Even in his grave, poor darling—the nameless grave, over which he would have no stone raised to perpetuate his misfortune—he seems to have no one who *really* belongs to him except me, who wear the pledge of his plighted love. And so I feel that never, all my life, can I call any man my lover or my husband. I want to go to him in heaven — and oh! I do so wish," she added, feverishly, "that it might be soon—quite, *quite* free, so that he may be sure that one woman thought more of him than all the world beside, even though the cruelty of man had given him no name to place above his grave."

The Earl pondered sadly for a moment, and then he said:

"Our marriage would make my mother very happy, Lily. It has been the desire of her heart for years past."

"She doesn't go the right way to promote it,"

replied the girl, with sparkling eyes and a heaving breast, "when she spends all her spare time in abusing Anthony to me."

"That is her want of policy," sighed the Earl. "She cannot forgive you for preferring him to me. But *I* do, and that is the main thing; and if we were once married, my mother would forget all her enmity towards our dear, dead Tony, and turn her entire attention to the reigning Countess of Culwarren."

"And urge me to go into society and be presented at Court, and go through all those hollow ceremonies which would become part of the duties of the position I had assumed. Oh, no, no! Culwarren," cried Lily, hiding her face in her hands; "leave me to my own sweet, sad thoughts and my memories of Anthony. I am not fit now for anything else."

"Well, I will not tease you further, dear. Your consent would be worth nothing if wrung from you against your will; I learned that once before. I know I should be much happier if I had you for my wife. Anthony loved you, and I

would guard and cherish you for his sake as well as your own. But I have no wish to purchase my happiness at the expense of yours; that would be too high a price to pay for it; so do not be afraid that I shall even mention the subject to you again." He laid the hand he held back upon her lap as he spoke, and rising, passed out again into the garden, whilst Lily sat where he had left her, arguing with herself.

"Is it my duty to try and make Culwarren happy in this way," she thought; "part of the debt I owe Aunt Emily for having been a mother to me for so many years? And yet, notwithstanding his own belief, I doubt my capability of doing so. As a cousin and a friend I love him, but as a husband I feel he would be simply detestable to me."

She was musing thus, with her head supported on her hand, when the door opened and Miss Paget looked in.

"Where is your aunt, dear?" she inquired.

"I don't know, Miss Paget. She left the room some time ago."

The melancholy tone of the girl's voice attracted the companion's attention. She closed the door and walked up to her.

"What is the matter, Lily?" she said. "Have you been crying again?"

"Only a little, Miss Paget."

"And for the old reason? Are your tears never to be dried?"

"I don't think so. I try so hard, but the least thing makes them flow. The song of the birds, the scent of the flowers, the glad, fresh feeling of the summer air! When I think that *he* will never enjoy these things again with me; that he is deaf and dumb and blind to them for ever, I wish that I were lying under the grass with him in Florence."

The companion took a seat upon the sofa, and drew the girl's head down upon her breast.

"Dear child, you have a faithful heart; but you must try and harden it against earthly sorrow. What good do these tears and sad imaginations do to you or anybody? They cannot bring the dead back to life. They can only unfit you for

your battle with the world. Try and forget Anthony, my love, or think of him only as one whose lot can never now be joined to yours. It is better he is gone, Lily. His life here could never have been anything but trouble and disappointment."

"I knew that. We both knew it, Miss Paget; but we had made up our minds to bear the trouble and disappointment together, and I think I could have lightened the load for him. Now all my future life can only be one long and incurable grief. I know you think because I am so young that I must soon forget. I have heard you say so. But every day the pain seems worse instead of better, and every day his image seems to be more vividly present to me, till sometimes, Miss Paget, I can hardly believe that he is dead at all."

The companion started at the idea.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Oh, I know well enough it is only my fancy," replied Lily, wearily. "I know he lies asleep where you left him in the English cemetery at Florence; but it is hard to believe one will never

see nor hear him again. I wish I could have kissed him once before he was buried. I might have realised it then."

"Lily, you must fight against these morbid ideas or they will grow upon you. You have vexed Lady Culwarren considerably as it is. She is naturally jealous that your cousin and you should devote so much time to mourning over what is irremediable. You must think of the living as well as the dead, Lily. Besides, I want you to adopt my view of the subject, and confess that it is all for the best. You never could have been Anthony's wife. *That* is quite certain, whatever you may think; and so further communication between you could only have been productive of disappointment. Now all your doubts are ended. You must think of him as happy and contented, and turn your attention to the more practical part of life."

"I will try, Miss Paget, but it is impossible that I can ever forget him."

"But how can you be sure, Lily, that a union with Anthony would have brought you happiness?

He was very young. His character was yet unformed, and men change sadly sometimes with the changing years. Ah, child, if you had seen as many faithless loves and miserable marriages as I have—if you knew the fickle nature of the sex and how often their vows of affection turn into curses—you would thank God, perhaps, that you have been spared the bitterness of seeing your dream dispelled. Keep your tears, Lily, till you find something better worth weeping for than an open grave. Weep for those who live, child, not for those who die—for those who are married, not for those who escape it."

"I will not believe it, Miss Paget. I have always loved you, but I cannot adopt your harsh creed. You suffer, I know, though you have never told me in what way; but might not even your sufferings be less, if you would but let your proud heart own the trial, and seek to be softened by its natural outlet—a flood of woman's tears?"

The companion rose suddenly and began to pace uneasily up and down the room.

"No, no! you do not know of what you are

talking, Lily. Mine is a trouble which no weeping can relieve—beside which *yours* is nothing. I would not speak to you as I do unless it were in the attempt to spare you what I myself have undergone. You think me hard and cruel, but my cruelty is kind. I have seen the miserable end of earthly love. I have gauged its very depth, and know that it is founded on the shallow earth that hides the hard rock of man's most selfish heart. We are their victims, Lily—they our tyrants, and, by force of strength, our masters. It is better to mourn them dead, oh! far better than live to find their so-called love turned against ourselves. You may not believe me—few of us care to believe unpleasant truths—but when I found that Anthony was—was—going from us, I almost rejoiced for your sake, that you were saved from making that terrible mistake, a marriage of affection."

"Oh, Miss Paget! what has changed you like this? You are almost as bitter against his memory as Aunt Emily."

"Oh, no! oh, no!"

"But indeed you are. What can she do more than call my love a folly—my faith, infatuation? And you seemed so different at Florence. When poor Anthony was first struck down, I thought you were heartbroken at the prospect of his death."

"At the aspect of his suffering, you mean, my dear. To see a strong young man so fearfully and wickedly injured, and in such terrible pain, was enough to upset any woman. Even the *sœur de charité* who assisted me used to cry over him. But that is all past. And my opinion concerning you and him, Lily, has never changed. I told you last year, when he was coming back to us, that your engagement was foolishness, and that Lord Culwarren would make you a much happier woman; and I say so still."

"I shall *never* marry Culwarren," replied Lily, "and I have told him so again this morning, once for all."

"The Earl had renewed his proposals to you?" said Miss Paget, quickly.

"Yes; but for the last time."

"And for the sake of—of Anthony's memory you have refused a coronet and the position of the Countess of Culwarren? Lily, you are very wrong. Lord Culwarren has offered you the best things that this world affords to women—rank, wealth, and protection. Pray reconsider your answer. You may never have such a chance again."

"I don't wish for it. I prefer to be left alone with my thoughts of Anthony."

The companion looked sorely puzzled. She leant her head upon her hand and wrinkled her brows.

"Have I done wrong all through," she thought, "in advising this girl to act against the dictates of her heart? She has a stronger will and character than I credited her with, and trouble has brought it out. Would she really have been happier—but what am I dreaming of? It is all past and done with. She has only to learn to forget him."

"What are you thinking about, Miss Paget?" inquired Lily, presently, finding her companion did not speak.

"Of you, dear, and of our poor Anthony. Well, no persuasions of mine will alter your determination, and so we must leave the work to Time, the great healer of all ills. I have expended nearly an hour talking to you, and it must be nearly luncheon-time. Ah! here is the Countess. I have been loitering here with Lily on my way to find you, Lady Culwarren. Mrs. Matthews wants to know——"

"I cannot possibly attend to Mrs. Matthews now, Miss Paget, for Mr. Ashfold has come over to talk business with Culwarren concerning the estate, and will stay the night at Gardenholme. You will see after his comfort, I am sure, in every respect."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW BARONET.

THE little lawyer looked as rosy and fresh, and younger than ever. He trotted after the Countess into the drawing-room with a brisk and jaunty air, and was quite overpoweringly polite to the other ladies of the family.

"Exactly so," he commenced. "But what need to ask Miss Paget to look after the comfort of any one? She has but to look at them, and straightway they are comforted. I always say, Miss Paget, that Gardenholme is a paradise, and you are the guardian angel that lets one in; for if *you* said there was no room, who could hope for admission? Exactly so."

"You will not be shut out this time, Mr. Ashfold, at all events," she answered, with a

nervous smile, for she was always a little afraid of the keen-eyed solicitor.

"Very glad to hear it, I am sure, Miss Paget. Very glad, too, to see you looking so well after—after such a prolonged winter. Ah! Miss Osprey, you are not so blooming as I should like to see you. Where are your midsummer roses? You should try change of air. There's no place for health like London. I never visit the country myself but I carry back with me scraps of rheumatism, sciatica, bronchitis, or pneumonia, caught from damp grass and dew-distilling trees. No trees or grass in London, thank God! I wouldn't live there if there were."

"Really, Mr. Ashfold," exclaimed Lady Culwarren, motioning him to a seat beside her, "you are not very complimentary to Gardenholme. I was about to propose driving you round the country this afternoon, to blow some of the office cobwebs out of your brain; but if you are afraid of catching rheumatism or bronchitis by the way, perhaps we had better remain at home and order a fire."

"Exactly so—I mean, your ladyship is laughing at me. I shall be only too honoured by being permitted to accompany you. Have I not just said that Gardenholme is a typical paradise?"

"But you lawyers never say what you mean or mean what you say."

"Ha! ha! ha! Very good, my lady, very good indeed. But when I spoke of the country just now I was thinking of Warminster Hall, Sir Hugh Loftus's estate—or, rather, the estate that *was* Sir Hugh's—for I suppose you have heard the news?"

"No, indeed! We never hear anything at Gardenholme. What is it?" asked the Countess, indifferently.

"Sir Hugh is dead——"

"Why, that happened two months ago, and the place is to be sold because there is no heir. Has any one bought it?"

"Exactly so. That is what they said, but *they* are generally wrong. The heir has turned up. The title and property have descended to the second son, Sir Arthur Loftus, and he is now

in possession of the estate. I have just come from him."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lady Culwarren. "This is really interesting. Lily! Miss Paget!—are you listening? Sir Arthur is actually home at Warminster Hall. We have so few neighbours, he will be quite an acquisition. What is he like, Mr. Ashfold?"

"Well, I don't think he looks exactly what one would call a ladies' man, Lady Culwarren. He has been a great scamp, you know, though I suppose we shall have to leave off saying that now."

"Of course! All young men of fashion sow their wild oats. Doubtless Sir Arthur will choose a wife from one of the county families, now that he has come into his property, and settle down. He's not married, is he?"

"Oh dear, no! I don't think he's married, though he looks old enough to be a grandfather."

"You don't mean to say so?"

"I do. His age is not more, I believe, than forty-five or six; but his hair is white and his

figure shrunk, and altogether he is a wreck. And I have heard he was such a fine, handsome, gallant-looking fellow. It's a sad comment on the folly of leading a dissipated life, Lady Culwarren."

"Oh, dear, we must be charitable and forget all that now," replied her ladyship, suavely. "Doubtless the poor fellow has had many temptations of which we know nothing. We should always be lenient to weaknesses of which we do not know the cause."

"In the young as well as the old?" interposed Miss Paget, quietly.

Lady Culwarren flashed one sharp look at her. She knew to what she alluded, and resented the implied rebuke.

"Well, I hope we shall see Sir Arthur at the Abbey very soon," she continued to Mr. Ashfold, "and you must tell him so from me when next you see him. He will enliven us, and I'm sure we want it, and will be a nice companion for Culwarren."

"Exactly so; and I have no doubt Sir Arthur

will be quick to avail himself of all his privileges. But the Hall is in a sad state of confusion at present, and filled with workmen. The baronet intends to have it completely renovated; and not before it requires it, I can tell you. Old Sir Hugh took no interest in the place. He spent all his time lamenting over the misfortunes of his sons."

At this moment a servant announced luncheon.

"That is a welcome sound," cried Lady Culwarren, as she rose and took Mr. Ashfold's arm. "Miss Paget, are you not going to join us? You look as if a glass of wine would do you good."

"Thanks; but you know that I scarcely ever take luncheon, and I have business to detain me upstairs. But see that Lily makes a good meal. She has been worrying herself this morning, and looks worn out."

"And so she will continue to do," replied the Countess, with some asperity, "so long as she sets the wishes of her best friends at defiance."

She sailed into the dining-room as she spoke, and poor Lily walked humbly and dejectedly after her, whilst Miss Paget darted upstairs, and

rushing into Mrs. Matthews' apartment, threw herself on the couch and burst into tears.

"Why, why, my dear lady, what's the matter now?" exclaimed the old woman, as she hobbled up to her side, and sat down beside her prostrate figure.

"Everything is the matter, nurse. Life seems to be one long, long torture, hemming one in on every side. Mr. Ashfold is in the house, and what do you think he has come to tell us? That that man who nearly killed my boy—who, in effect, did kill him — has actually returned to Warminster Hall, and intends to settle there."

Mrs. Matthews looked dismayed.

"Eh, eh!" she ejaculated; "that's bad hearing; but surely he'll never have the audacity to force his way into the Abbey?"

"He did so before; why not now? Besides, Lady Culwarren, in her ignorance, will encourage him, and it will turn my life into a hell. I could not stand it."

"No, no; you must not stand it," repeated the old nurse, oracularly. "It would be wrong

—unnatural and cruel. My dear late master never dreamt in placing you here that he would subject you to such a trial. My dear, when I have seen your suffering, and especially of late, I have often wished that——"

"*What* have you wished, nurse?"

"That you had the courage to confess everything to her ladyship."

Lady Diana shuddered.

"Oh! I could not. You don't know her, Matthews, as I do—how hard and bitter she can be against the erring. She would not keep my shameful secret, not even for her late husband's or her son's sake. She would let it out, little by little, either in moments of confidence or temper, till every dairymaid knew that Lady Diana Melstrom had been no better than any poor fallen girl from whom they draw their skirts aside in passing."

"Oh, hush! hush, my lady! You shall not speak of yourself in such terms in my hearing. You were never like that, thank God. You are as pure in His sight to-day as if you had not left

your home with that dishonourable gentleman. But, depend upon it, he will not dare to come here, and if he does it once, why, I'll go over to Warminster Hall and have a talk with him, and I'm bound it'll be the last we'll see of him."

"And then there is another thing, nurse. I am unhappy about Lily. I am so afraid I have acted unwisely with regard to her. She is breaking her heart, poor child, over Master Anthony. She cannot forget him. I begin to fear that she never will, and her health may be seriously affected. You know how anxious I was that she should marry Culwarren and forget all about my poor unfortunate boy; but she has refused him point-blank this morning, and declares that she will die faithful to Anthony—that all she wants is to die and go to him. Supposing she frets herself into her grave; there will be another sin on my unhappy head."

"My dear lady," replied the old woman, while she caressed and patted the figure of her mistress, "it is not for such as I am to find fault with any of your actions, but, if I may be so bold as to

say it, I have always thought you were wrong in that particular. You should have left it in God's hands. You could have done just as you have done, and yet used no deception, which is bound to come out some day. Love is a sacred thing, my dearie, though I know you scoff at it; but one swallow doesn't make a summer, and one bad man doesn't make all the world bad. You don't mean to tell me as you thought Master Anthony was like others as you've known?"

"Oh, don't speak of him! My poor lost boy!" cried Lady Diana, sobbing. "Only restored to me, as it were, to be taken away again. If I had had the courage to confess that I was his mother and to go away with him to some country where neither my shame nor his misfortune were public property, all this misery might have been avoided."

"Yes, my lady, that is what you ought to have done, and what I must say I thought you *would* do when you heard the secret of his birth. And then, old as I am, I would have begged for the privilege of going with you, my dearie, and

looking after you both to my life's end, for the sake of my dear master and your brother."

"Oh, Matthews! you have always been my best and truest friend. But I thought and thought over this problem until I believed I had decided for the best. And why should I regret what has occurred? What had my darling boy to expect on leaving his bed of sickness? The only man who had befriended him was turned into his enemy. Lady Culwarren was more bitterly set against him, if possible, than before. Weakened by long illness, without money and without friends, with a mother who dared not acknowledge him, and no prospect of gaining the girl he loved, I felt that his lot would be indeed both lonely and hopeless. This is the thought that has consoled me when I have been weak enough to wish that things were other than they are. But oh! the inexpressible longing—the yearning to hold him in my arms again—to look into his eyes — to hear his voice — my own, own, unforgotten boy!"

"My lady," said the old woman, seriously,

"you mustn't excite yourself like this, or you will be ill. I've wished—oh! so many times—that that Mr. Ashfold's tongue had been cut out before he came and upset you with his revelations. You was quiet enough before then, but it's been nothing but turmoil and worry since. If you had only gone on thinking of Mr. Anthony as you used to think, you'd have been better able to part with him now."

"I don't know that, Matthews. Some unaccountable instinct always made me love him. Perhaps it was a look he had of—of—Sir Arthur, when I believed him to be good and true. I wonder if any woman was ever so hardly punished for a fault before. To have the child of my love cut down before my eyes by the sword of his own father—that father who had killed *me* first by causing my very name to be blotted out of existence. And he can come into his title and property, and begin to make vast improvements (as the solicitor told us), and settle himself down comfortably, without a thought, I suppose, of the dear child he left bleeding to death by

a thrust from his own hand. This is the justice God metes out to men and women, nurse. *They* have the pleasure and the profit—*we* the sorrow and the shame."

"Not always, dear lady, not always. The Lord may hold His hand for a while, but depend upon it He will strike in the end. Somehow—I dare say you will smile at me, dearie, and say it is an old woman's folly, but I often fancy things will come straight for you before you die. You will forgive my asking the question, but is *that woman* still alive?"

"I do not know, nurse. I don't care."

"But you should care, my lady, because it makes all the difference to you, and Sir Arthur might do you justice even at the eleventh hour."

"*Justice!* Do you think I would accept it from the hands of the man who never gave me affection? He declared, when I met him in the Cascine Gardens, that he had always loved me, and remorse had made him what he is. But what will men *not* swear? It was a strange love that destroyed my happy youth. Rather call it a

remorseless passion, that swept over all my hopes like the deadly sirocco over a flower-garden, blasting and burning as it goes. Yet—yet—if God had but left me—*Anthony*!"

"Don't blame God, my lady, but man. God gave him to you, but the cruelty of man has taken him away again, and now, it seems to me, that if ever you are to gather up the remnant of happiness that remains to you, the time has come."

"I don't understand you, nurse."

"Perhaps not, my dear lady, but I'll try and make my meaning clear."

And then Mrs. Matthews drew Lady Diana Melstrom's weary head down upon her bosom, just as she had often done when she was a little motherless child, or a young, high-spirited, heedless girl, and began to talk to her of ways and means, and to point out how her future peace of mind could best be secured, until her sobbing ceased and the tears dried on her cheeks, and she joined in the discussion with almost an animated look upon her face. And whilst Miss

Paget was thus occupied luncheon was concluded, and the somewhat unsympathetic party had prepared to disperse.

It had been a gloomy meal. Lord Culwarren's spirits had not improved under his rejection at Lily's hands, and he was ill-disposed either to talk about business or to bear patiently with Mr. Ashfold's attempts at jocularity. A chance allusion to Anthony Melstrom on the lawyer's part had brought such a storm of invectives on his head from Culwarren that he had nearly choked himself from nervousness, and felt infinitely relieved when the Countess rose from table and invited him to drive with her.

"I can tell you all you may want to know about that wretched young man's death," she whispered, "and his disgraceful conduct beforehand; but it is really not safe to mention the subject to my son. He and Miss Osprey have some ridiculous notion in their heads that this young man was *wronged*, whereas the real truth is that he wronged everybody who was unfortunate enough to come across him. But let us

take our drive whilst the afternoon continues fine. I think I see something like a rain-cloud setting in from the west. I shall not ask you to accompany me to-day, Lily," she continued, to her niece. "Mr. Ashfold and I have not met for so long that we have a great deal to talk over. Culwarren, my dear, I hope you will rest this afternoon, and keep yourself fresh for the evening. Mr. Ashfold must positively have a private interview with you before he leaves Gardenholme. The tenants on the Bilger estate are likely to give us trouble. If *you* won't give your mind to it, *I* must."

"Well, mother, you can get the gist of it into your head, and give me the benefit of your experience. Or settle it yourself, if it pleases you better. The matter is perfectly indifferent to me."

Lady Culwarren shrugged her big shoulders and glanced at the solicitor.

"Perhaps we had better settle it between ourselves, Mr. Ashfold, after all. His lordship would not have made a good lawyer. He

positively detests anything like litigation or trouble of any sort."

"Exactly so. It is fortunate he has your ladyship's clear head and excellent sense to relieve him of such unpalatable duties," replied the little solicitor, as he followed her to the carriage.

Lord Culwarren quitted the luncheon-room by another egress, and Lily was left alone. How still and quiet everything appeared! The carriage had rolled away upon the gravel drive, and the sound of its wheels was already lost in the distance. The servants had retreated to their own quarters, and were holding high holiday over the beef and beer of the kitchen dinner. Culwarren had sauntered out to the stables; Miss Paget was shut up in her own room. Only Lily—so it seemed to her—inhabited that vast old Abbey, with its impenetrable walls, and its thick oaken flooring, its stained windows, and carved mantelpieces, and chambers hung with tapestry or leather. She gazed in a dreamy fashion from the luncheon-table, spread with damask, and

laden with cut glass and solid silver, and a rare set of old Crown Derby china, to the emerald lawn, which stretched on either side the windows, covered with beds of blooming flowers and bordered by a belt of magnificent trees, and wondered how it was that with so many good things God permitted people to be so unhappy. She had been surrounded with these luxuries all her life. Never had she known the want of dainty food and suitable dresses, and all the pleasures incidental to her youth. And yet she would have given them all up for ever, from that moment, for one single sight of Anthony.

"Oh!" she thought, with her eyes raised to heaven, "if God would only be merciful, and send him back again for one short moment, that I might once more hear him say those words, 'I love you, Lily.'"

There was the big mulberry-tree, which he used to shake for her when they were children, and where they stained their clothes so dreadfully with ripe mulberries that Miss Paget kept them both in the nursery for a whole afternoon,

learning a page out of "The Child's Guide to Knowledge."

She could remember climbing over the invisible fence, too, which divided the lawn from the park, and tearing her best frock, and Tony taking the blame on himself and telling Miss Paget that *he* did it, and getting the punishment instead of her. Dear, kind Tony! How often he had defended and protected her, from the time that he killed the gander that ran hissing after her, to the moment when he turned to leave Gardenholme, and Aunt Emily reproached her for openly avowing her love for him! Oh, if she could but avow it now—if she could but let him know that he was more than earth and heaven both to her poor sorrowing heart! Lily felt the hot tears rising again at the thought, and dashed them hastily away.

"I must not cry any more," she said to herself; "I shall be ill, as Miss Paget said, if I continue to show so little self-control. I must try and occupy myself more. I must get some hard, difficult work to do, that will absorb all

my attention and leave me no time for brooding over my irremediable loss."

She rose from her seat with the intention of seeking some book that should distract her mind, but a slight shadow that came between the midsummer sunshine and her vision caused her to look again towards the lawn before she left the room, and there upon the threshold of the open window stood—*Anthony*.

CHAPTER IX.

A RESURRECTION.

HAD Lily Osprey been alone at midnight, in one of the ghostly-looking chambers of the old Abbey, and Anthony Melstrom (whom she fully believed to be lying dead and buried in the cemetery at Florence) had thus suddenly appeared to her, she would have thought her prayer had been answered, and God had sent his spirit to comfort her. But the sun was shining, the flowers were blooming, a lark was singing high up in the sky, and the form that stood upon the threshold was clad in a prosaic suit of summer tweed. Still, her first dazed idea was that her sight had played her false, and the visage photographed on her mind was reflected from the retina of her eyes. She passed her hand once or twice across them in

a frightened manner, and stood by the table trembling.

"*Lily*," said a well-remembered voice.

Still she did not move. It must be a delusion —an hallucination. It could not be Anthony.

"Lily," repeated the voice, more anxiously; "my darling, won't you speak to me?"

Then the girl tore her hands away from before her face, and gazed at him with dilated eyes and parted lips, as she would have done at a vision.

"Lily," he said, for the third time, "I am come back to you again. Say you are glad to see me."

He stepped over the threshold, and advancing to her side, laid his hand upon her arms.

The human touch, the bright face looking so anxiously into her own, the tweed suit, the brown felt hat, all combined to bring home to her the conviction that she had been the victim of some terrible mistake or error. Anthony had never been dead. He was breathing and living beside her. But the reaction from sorrow to joy

was too sudden, and Lily gave a shriek that reverberated through the lower part of the house.

"Hush, hush, my dearest," exclaimed Anthony; "you will summon the whole establishment, and I want so much to have you for a little while to myself. What has alarmed you, Lily? Did you take me for a ghost?"

But all her answer was to fling herself into his arms, and cling closely round his neck, whilst she sobbed beneath her breath, "*Not* dead! *not* dead!"

He smoothed her hair, and pressed innumerable lover's kisses upon her face before he found time to question her remark. But when they were a little calmer, he said:

"*Not dead!* Why, of course not. Very much alive. Has any rumour reached you to the contrary, Lily?"

"Any rumour!" she repeated, staring wildly in his face. "Why, we have mourned you as dead for the last nine months. Miss Paget told us that you had died of your wounds at Florence."

"Miss Paget told you so," said Anthony,

vaguely, as he pushed the hair off his brow. "But this is incredible. Is not Miss Paget at Gardenholme as usual?"

"Certainly; she returned home as soon as you had no further need of her. She is here now."

"And she said that I was *dead*? Why, I have written to her every fortnight since we parted, and she has answered all my letters. Has she not given you the notes which I enclosed for you?"

"Never! I have not received a line. How much suffering it would have saved me if I had! Look, Anthony, at this," and Lily touched the sleeve of her crape-trimmed dress as she spoke. He regarded it as one in a dream.

"I do not know what to say or to think," he answered; "I feel perfectly mystified. But, Lily, the main thing is, are you glad to get me back again?"

"Oh, Tony! if you could but know what the past year has been to me. My life seemed ended."

"I cannot conceive the cruelty that could

subject you to such an ordeal, darling. But I must tell you the whole story now. Come with me to our little bower, where we shall be quiet and undisturbed. I cannot trust myself to meet anybody else until I have put you in possession of the truth."

He took her hand and led her out into the sunshine as he spoke, and Lily felt as though she had died of her grief and met him on the plains of heaven, where they were going to be happy evermore. The tears of joyful surprise were still glittering in her eyes, but she could not take them off the figure beside her, lest it should vanish again from her sight.

Anthony was taller and more manly-looking than he had been a year before. His frame had developed muscle, and his face was brown with travel and exposure. His thin, nervous hand held hers as in a vice, as though he were determined never to lose her again, and he led her straight to the Lady's Bower, and sitting down upon the rustic bench, folded her in his arms, and leant his cheek against her own.

"There, my little love," he whispered, "rest there in your own place against my heart, whilst I try to unravel this marvellous mystery."

How happy she felt as she lay with her face against his breast, and dared to believe at last that God had really sent her Anthony back to her again!

"It is too wonderful," she murmured; "it is all too wonderful to believe."

"What is most wonderful to me," said Anthony, "is the part Miss Paget has taken in the affair. What interest can she possibly have had in circulating a report of my death, when any moment I might have returned to refute her statement?"

"Tell me everything from the beginning," urged Lily, nestling still closer to him.

"When I first became conscious after my accident, I waked up, as you know, to find Miss Paget by my side. Nothing could have exceeded her tender care of me. She nursed me herself both day and night, and the Italian doctor affirmed afterwards that I owed my life entirely to her solicitude. And I learned in that time to love and

appreciate her so. I had never known before what a highly intellectual woman she is, and what a charming, sympathetic companion she can be. She seemed to come out of her shell entirely, and was as conversational and confidential as possible. You know we had always regarded her as a sort of second mother to us all, but before I was pronounced convalescent I looked upon her as my best friend."

"She is that, I am sure, Tony, and she loves you dearly."

"And yet she could wring your tender heart, my darling. Oh, no, the two things are not compatible; I have been mistaken in her. But to go on with my story. Regarding her in such a light, you may suppose I was quite ready to listen to her suggestions regarding my future life. As soon as I was well enough to discuss business, Miss Paget told me how anxious she was to get me away from Fosbrooke and his companions, and I agreed with her that, as far as I was concerned, Bohemianism had turned out a failure. She asked me what I would rather do myself, and

I said that if I had money I should go out to America and try and make a fortune, to enable me to come home and marry you, my darling."

"Dear, *dear* Anthony," interpolated Lily.

"Upon that, Miss Paget did a grand and generous thing, Lily, for which I can never repay her nor be sufficiently grateful. It seems that your uncle and my benefactor, the late Earl of Culwarren, had left her a liberal annuity at his death, which she had never touched, but left to accumulate in the bank, as she received all she required from Lady Culwarren. Will you believe, dear, that she actually drew out five thousand pounds of this money, and placed it to my credit with a banker in New York? I argued with her against it again and again, and only consented to use it at last on the condition that it was a loan, to be repaid with interest. But even then it was a noble action that has simply been the means of making me."

"I *love* her for it," cried Lily, enthusiastically; "but why did she give me and Culwarren this terrible pain?"

"Poor old Cul! Has he really fretted after me?"

"You would not use the word *fretted*, Tony, if you saw how changed he is. He said your death had taken all the sunshine out of his life."

"Dear old fellow! We were always chums before your sweet eyes came between us, Lily," replied Anthony, looking into them.

"They will never come between you again, Tony. They are all yours henceforward. Culwarren understands perfectly now that, had you never come back to me, I should have remained true to your memory to my life's end. I told him so only this morning, and he said he sympathised with my feelings."

"My very own girl," replied Anthony, with action appropriate to the speech, "I wish I were worthier of such a heart as yours. But Miss Paget's goodness to me did not stop there, Lily. She procured me, through the agency of some old friends of hers in Florence, an introduction to a first-class house in New York."

"Old friends of Miss Paget's in Florence!" ejaculated Lily; "I didn't know she had ever been there before."

"She lived there once, so she told me."

"What a strange woman she is; so reserved and silent! I think there must be some great mystery in her life, as well as a great trouble."

"I fancy so, too, Lily, for on several occasions when I was ill and she thought me asleep, I have heard her pray and weep over me, as if my anticipated death recalled some lamentable epoch in her own life. I wonder if she has ever been married?"

"Oh, no," said the girl, simply; "why, she is *Miss* Paget."

"People have changed their names before now, Lily. However, that is no concern of ours. I was very anxious, as you may suppose, to see you before I sailed for America, but Miss Paget so earnestly begged me not to do so, that I gave in to her wishes, not, however, until she had consented to carry my farewell letter to you to Gardenholme. I suppose she never delivered it."

"Certainly not; the letter containing the news of your death preceded her return."

"Inexplicable woman," exclaimed Anthony. "But I don't like this, Lily, and I must have a full explanation from Miss Paget herself. It looks as if she had been in league with Lady Culwarren to keep us apart. And yet I can hardly believe it of her. I know she thought I had not the remotest chance of marrying you, and that the sooner I put the idea out of my head the better; but I did not think her capable of subterfuge, even for so desirable an object as making you the Countess of Culwarren."

"Stop," cried Lily, "a light breaks in upon me. I understand now why Miss Paget looked so perturbed this morning when I told her I had refused Culwarren again."

"Ah, Culwarren *has* been making another attempt to snare my bird, then," said Anthony.

"Ah, Tony, had you been present at our interview, you would know how little reason you have to be jealous. I had been expressing my wish to go and see your grave—love, how good it is to

know there is no grave as yet to see—and poor Cul offered to take me there—as his wife. There was no love-making about it, dear. He said he mourned for you as much as I did, and with remorse added to his grief, for he always accuses himself of being your murderer, but that the marriage would please his mother, and he thought I should find my life a very lonely one."

"And what did my darling say to that?"

"I told him '*No*,' once and for ever. I said I would wait as I was until I joined you in heaven and could be your wife there. *That* is what I said, my own Tony."

"Dear sweetheart," he answered, "we are together for ever now. I have returned home in a better position than I ever hoped to be, Lily, and I intend to oppose Lady Culwarren to the bitter end. If she will not give you to me——"

"I will run away with you," interposed Lily.

"Hullo! That's one way of disposing of the matter. Now, I am more moderate, Miss Osprey, and was about to say that I would wait till you are of age and come to me of your own free will."

"Never mind that now. I am too happy already to realise more happiness. It would seem too much. What *is* your position, Tony?"

"Ah! I forgot. I went out to New York with introductions to a stockbroker, Lily, and, like all the clerks on Wall Street, played a little at the game of speculation myself. One day I got a 'dandy tip,' that turned up trumps. It was the merest luck, you know, but it has made me. I have turned over Miss Paget's money twice since I went out, and put it into a newly established branch firm in London, of which they have made me the junior partner. It won't be an establishment like Gardenholme, my darling, to which I shall take you when you are ready to come, but it will have comfort and refinement, and a faithful heart to watch over your interests to your life's end."

"Oh! Tony, Tony! we shall be *so* happy! Aunt Emily may say what she likes and do what she likes. She will never make me give you up again—*you*, whom God has sent back to me in answer to my prayers. But tell me one thing,

dear. Did you write to Miss Paget to say you were coming home?"

"I did not, Lily. I was so anxious to surprise you with my good news, and, of course, I had no idea what a shock my unexpected appearance would be to you. I have believed all along that Miss Paget gave you my enclosed letters, because she has often told me how impossible it was for you to answer them under existing circumstances. Again and again she has written of your low spirits and continued faith in me, but never once hinted that you thought I had gone from you for ever. I have regarded her as my benefactress. I do so still, but I don't know how I shall be able to forgive her for her cruelty to you."

"But it is all—all—over," whispered Lily.

"Thank God! yes. And Culwarren is altered, you say. I trust that my supposed death has, at least, made him give up his fatal infatuation for gambling."

"Oh, entirely. We never hear anything of it now."

"I am glad of that. And—and—Fosbrooke,"

continued Anthony, wistfully. "Have you ever heard anything more of *him*?"

"Never! and I hope we never shall! Don't speak of him, the horrid man, who so nearly caused your death."

"But that was only *fortune de la guerre*. It might have been the other way, and I gave him full cause to quarrel with me. I often think of Fosbrooke, Lily, and wish that I could speak to him again. If he were in want of funds or friendship, I would gladly proffer him both. He was a kind, good friend to me when the world had used me hardly. He shared his money with me and his luck, and I can't forget such things in a hurry. Besides, he was a thoroughly kind-hearted fellow, though his life had made him cynical, and I feel sure he has bitterly repented the issue of the duel. I wonder if he, too, thinks me dead? I should much like to know. Miss Paget may have written more than one letter on the subject. I am all curiosity to see her and learn the reason of her conduct. Where is she, Lily? Where are they all?"

"Aunt Emily has taken Mr. Ashfold, who arrived here to-day, for a drive; Culwarren had just left me when you came—I think he went towards the stables; and Miss Paget is somewhere upstairs—you would be sure to find her in old Mrs. Matthews' room — they are almost always together."

"Will you go and find her for me, darling? If the coast is clear, I should like to see Miss Paget at once. There is no need to prepare her for my advent. *She* knows well enough that I am in the land of the living. Tell her only that a gentleman, who has a message for her from New York, desires a private interview, and trust to her to make it as private as one could wish."

"I will go now," said Lily, rising, "before Aunt Emily returns. Oh, Tony! do I look *too* glad? Will she read the joyful news in my eyes?"

"You *do* look rather rosy, my darling, and as if you had just awakened from a long, long sleep."

"And so I have—a sleep of utter hopelessness

and despair. I cannot believe I am the same girl I was an hour ago. How beautiful life is, and how can people believe but that God is watching over us everywhere? Tony, did you ever see a lovelier season for flowers? The garden seems running over with them, as if it could not hold so many. And yet I do not think I ever noticed it till now. How could I enjoy flowers and sunshine and melody? They all hurt me so, whilst my heart was in your grave."

Anthony took the little dimpled hand that hung down at her side, and pressed it reverentially to his lips as she flitted away from him in the direction of the Abbey. She found Miss Paget in the music-room, seated before the organ, which she knew so well how to manipulate. It was her favourite custom, when her spirits had been upset, which they too often were, to get away, if possible, by herself, and calm the perturbation of her mind under the influence of music. As Lily entered the house, the grand notes of Rossini's "Stabat Mater" were pealing forth from the instrument and reverberating through the raftered and

groined roof. It sounded to the girl's excited imagination like a pæan of thanksgiving and victory rather than a psalm of despair, and she walked up to the companion's side with a flushed and agitated face, and laid her hand upon her shoulder.

"Miss Paget, dear," she commenced.

"Why, Lily, what has happened?" exclaimed her friend, as she turned and regarded her. "Have you been out in the sun without a covering to your head? Do you feel well? You look quite feverish."

"I am quite well, Miss Paget; indeed I am *very* well, only I have been walking fast. And I have been looking for you. Some one wants to see you—a gentleman."

"*A gentleman*," echoed Miss Paget, quickly. "Not—not—from Warminster Hall?"

"The new baronet, of whom Mr. Ashfold was speaking—Sir Arthur Loftus? Oh, no! This is a gentleman from New York, and he says he has a private message for you, and wishes to see you alone."

The companion clutched the girl's soft arm until she hurt her, but her lips and tongue seemed to have suddenly become so dry and harsh that it was some moments before she could articulate :

"A — gentleman — from — New York, Lily ! What can he want with me ? Is it good news or —or—bad ? "

It seemed strange to Miss Paget, even in the midst of her own agitation, that Lily should smile broadly as she replied :

" How can I tell ? He particularly asks for a private interview with you, so he is not likely to confide his mission to me."

" Where is he ? "

" In the garden. I met him there. None of the servants have seen him yet."

" Show him in here, then," said Miss Paget, who was shaking with nervous anticipation. " And, Lily dear, you will see that we are undisturbed ? Stay in the ante-chamber, and don't let any of the servants pass through."

" Of course I will, Miss Paget, but don't look so distressed about it. I don't think this gentleman's

news can be *very* bad," said the girl, softly kissing her brow, "or he would look graver over it."

"Ah! Lily, Lily! you don't know, you cannot understand," replied the elder woman, with a low moan, as she bowed her head upon her hand and trembled with an exceeding fear.

"Well, I'll fetch the gentleman at once, and he can answer for himself," cried Lily, as she ran back to the Lady's Bower, and smuggled Anthony Melstrom unseen through the dining-room windows and the ante-chamber, to the very door of the music-room.

CHAPTER X.

MOTHER AND SON.

WHEN Anthony perceived that Miss Paget was crouched in the same attitude of fearful expectation that Lily had described to him as having left her in, he thought it best to put an end to her anticipations of evil at once, and advancing boldly into the centre of the room, he spoke her name. The companion looked up quickly, gave a start of the intensest surprise, and then, with a glad laugh of relief, sprang forward and kissed him.

"Oh, Anthony! is this really you? I could not conceive it possible. I thought a stranger had brought me some terrible news."

But at this juncture the remembrance of the deceit she had practised concerning him—of the confession, the confusion, the reproaches that

must follow, and of the unpleasant consequences that might ensue from the young man being found at Gardenholme, all flashed across her mind, and she almost pushed him from her, exclaiming, hastily:

"But why are you *here*? You know the stringency of the Countess's prohibition. And why have you left New York without a word of warning to myself? I think you owed me so much for the trouble I took to send you there."

"I did not prepare you for my return, Miss Paget, because I thought to afford you a pleasant surprise by the news I bring. As for my appearing at Gardenholme without the permission of her ladyship, you must please to remember that the Abbey belongs to Lord Culwarren — not to his mother — and he gave me many an invitation, whilst in Florence, to make myself welcome here. But that is a matter which concerns only him and myself. I have learned something since my return which is likely to prove of far greater consequence. Miss Paget, tell me the truth. With

what motive have you spread this false rumour of my death?"

The companion sank back into her chair, but answered nothing.

"I have so much to thank you for," continued Anthony, "and I have learnt to love you so dearly for all your kindness to me, that I have not the heart to reproach you for adopting a course which I feel sure was not done with any idea of injuring me. But it is inexplicable. *Why* did you do it?"

"Hush! do not ask me," said Miss Paget, faintly.

"But I *must* ask you. I must know why you have deliberately inflicted such pain upon the girl I love, and whom you knew it was the whole desire of my life to win. Just look at Lily. See how changed and ill she appears. When I first saw her, so white and fragile in her crape-bound garments, I hardly knew my little love again. And it has all come from grief for me—where she might have been so happy."

"She can never be happy—with *you*!"

"Why not, Miss Paget? I have returned home—if not rich, at least with a competency. Thanks to you and your generous behaviour, I am the junior partner in the house of Allnutt, now Allnutt and Melstrom. And Lily and I intend to *try* if we can be happy together, whether we succeed or not. But what motive had you in banishing all hope from her tender heart by saying I was dead?"

"My tongue is tied," replied Miss Paget. "It is a question that I cannot answer, Anthony."

"It is a question that you will have to answer, my dear friend, to Culwarren and his mother, if not to me. Every one will ask it of you. Why not satisfy my curiosity now?"

Miss Paget thought a moment, and then said, in a low voice:

"I believed it to be kinder and better for both your sakes."

"*Kinder!* To wring that poor child's heart by making her think that she would never see me any more. How you can have watched her day by day weeping over an imaginary grave, and

kept up the deception, I cannot think. You must be made of adamant. And yet how tender and thoughtful you were for me!"

"Oh, spare me your reproaches, Anthony! If I have done anything in the past to evoke your gratitude, do not press me for an answer to this question now."

"You say that because you are ashamed to give it me."

"Yes, yes, I am! You judge me rightly there."

"You have thought," went on the young man, passionately, "to pander to Lady Culwarren's hatred of me, and desire to see her niece married to her son, by making Lily believe that I was dead, in order that she might become the better inclined to listen to his suit. Once safely married, you would have earned the thanks of your benefactress and defied my petty rage and misery. Perhaps you were even bribed to get me out of the way—God knows!—and the Countess will have no need to be informed of the failure of the plot. But it *has* failed, Miss Paget, entirely. You

have tried to run with the hare and to hunt with the hounds, but your machinations are of no avail. I have returned in a position to marry Lily, and mean to marry her, *coûte qu'il coûte.*"

The deep silence that ensued made Anthony fear lest he had gone too far.

"Forgive me," he said, falteringly, "if in speaking so openly I have forgotten all I owe to you, Miss Paget. I should not be here now, ready and able to do battle for my darling, if your generosity had not provided me with the means of being so. And the remembrance of your loving care in my illness I shall carry to the grave. Only I feel dazed and troubled by this great mystery, and I beg of you to solve it for me. Haven't I a right to ask it, if only to know how to order my conduct for the future? You have placed me in a false position in England. Is it strange I should demand an explanation?"

Miss Paget lifted her face to his. He was shocked to see how old and worn it looked.

"No, Anthony, it was not strange. I *do* owe you an explanation, and you shall have it, only it

is so bitter a confession, that perhaps you may never look upon my face again when you have heard it."

He started forward and clasped her hand.

"No, no! That is impossible. Whatever your revelation may entail, it can never make me so ungrateful. Did you do this thing with a view to parting Lily and myself?"

"I did."

"And yet you knew we loved each other?"

"Yes, I knew it. But you are both young, and love is not immortal. It was better that you should suffer before marriage than after. And there is a stain upon your life, poor boy, that will be felt to the third and fourth generation."

"You mean the unhappy accident of my birth?" said the young man, gloomily. "I have no relations, and I am never to make any. A bitter lot indeed!"

"It *is* a bitter lot," replied the companion, "and so is mine. Listen to me, Anthony, and I will tell you why it behoves *me*, of all people, to do nothing to bring you and Lily Osprey together.

You have called the Countess of Culwarren my benefactress. You are right. From the moment I entered her house she has placed every trust and confidence in me, and treated me like a friend. I know how set she is against your marriage to her niece, and for what reason. She told you that you are a man without a name—that your unhappy mother's reputation was stained with infamy—that you were a bastard substitute for her dead child; but she never told you *who* your mother was, because she does not know. You shall learn the bitter truth from me."

"Good heavens! Do you know my mother?" exclaimed Anthony, starting violently. "Is she living? Is it possible that I may see her?"

"Hush, hush, poor boy! It would be far better for you and for herself if she were dead, for it is to her you owe the bitterest misfortune of your life," replied Miss Paget, as she rose from her chair, and after walking up and down the room once or twice, threw herself upon a sofa. "Oh, my unhappy Tony! Your searching questions have brought the burning blush of shame upon my cheek, which

I must now see reflected on your own. But treat me as you will—despise me—spurn me—curse me! I am your mother!"

At these words Anthony sprang back as if some one had struck him in the face.

"Good God!" he cried, "my mother?"

"Oh, be generous, darling," continued Miss Paget, "and do not force me to reveal the miserable story of the past. Don't ask me to rehearse the bitter tragedy of youthful love—so wronged, so blighted. Don't press me to say *who* I am or who I was. Think only of me as a very wretched woman, whose heaviest punishment has lain in not being able to acknowledge the child she brought into the world. But forgive me if you can, for your resentment would prove the last drop to make my full cup overflow. You say that good fortune has come to you, and I am thankful. Be content with that. Pursue your path in life. Leave me to mine, nor ever try to guess the tears of remorse that must pursue me to the grave."

Anthony regarded the graceful, prostrate form

upon the sofa—recalled the many acts of kindness he had received from this sad, grave woman from his infancy, and ejaculated in an awed voice:

"Can this be true?"

Miss Paget's answer came through stifled sobs.

"As true as that God is listening to my sorrowful confession now."

A new light beamed in the young man's eyes. He approached the sofa softly, almost reverently, and kneeling down beside it, said:

"Then, since it *is* so, my path in life must never more be separate from yours. Do you think I would desert you, mother?"

He pronounced the last word slowly and timidly, as if he feared to wound her. But as Miss Paget heard it, she raised her head and listened, as if she were receiving an audible message from heaven.

"Oh, say that word again," she whispered. 'Let me watch your dear lips form the sound for which my soul has hungered."

"Mother!" pronounced Anthony more reso-

lutely, as he cast his arms around her. She turned and folded him in a close embrace.

"Oh, hush," she sobbed; "no more. The echo of that word can never pass away in silence. Oh, my boy, my darling! My one child! To hear you call me by that name has paid for half my life's misfortune."

"Why have I not called you by it all my life?" demanded Anthony. "Why did you deprive me of the happiness of knowing I was yours? We are each other's mutual misfortune, mother. Surely we could have done it better together than apart."

"Perhaps so, love. Indeed, I am sure we might; but the option of choice was taken out of my hands. Don't think I deserted you or was ashamed of you, my precious Anthony; but my fate was decided by others. I am Lady Diana Melstrom, Tony, and the late Earl was my brother and your uncle."

"You are the beautiful Aunt Diana who was supposed to have been killed by an accident?" exclaimed Anthony. "How I wonder the suspicion

never entered my head, for you *are* very beautiful, mother; I have always said so."

"I *was* so once, Anthony, perhaps, but there is not much of it left now. Your uncle spread the report of the accident to save my reputation. He accomplished his purpose, but he killed my life."

"Poor mother," said Anthony, laying his head upon her breast, "to have lived all these years in a dependent position for my sake! And my father?"

Lady Diana shrank backward.

"Do not allude to him, Tony. His name shall never pass my lips. He is utterly unworthy both of you and me. He was a friend of the family, and courted me secretly, without the knowledge of my brother, who never would have permitted such a match, for though your father was of good family, he was very wild, and had been engaged in reckless courses. But what does a girl know of such things? I was very young, dear—there are only eighteen years between us—and very headstrong. My dear brother had indulged me too

much, and let me have my own way in everything. So, when he found out what was going on, he ordered my lover to leave Gardenholme, and I was so wilful that when he pressed me to accompany him and become his wife, I forgot all sense of duty or decency, and eloped from the Abbey—which none of my family had ever disgraced before—like a dairymaid running after a ploughboy."

"Hush, mother!" interrupted Anthony. "If you are going to abuse yourself, I will listen no more. Since you have confessed your relationship to me, you are sacred in my eyes."

"Dearest, how can I tell my story without condemning myself? Your father and I were married at a church in London."

"*Married*, dear mother! Married!" cried Anthony, starting into a sitting posture.

"Ah, dear child, wait until you have heard the end. We were married (or I thought we were) and went to live upon the Continent. My brother was so angry that he refused to see me; but I was intensely happy in those first months of wedded life, and fondly believed that every-

thing would come right in the end. I loved your father dearly—poor simple fool that I was—and built my faith upon him as a model of all manly virtues. Soon after I had left him, my brother married Emily, whom I had never seen. But at the end of the third year of my marriage, a terrible awakening was in store for me. We had returned to England by that time, and established ourselves in a house in London, and I confidently expected that my brother, who was happy in the possession of his wife and child, would hold out a flag of truce to me. But his pride had been too greatly wounded, and it never came. But something else did. One day I received a letter in a strange handwriting, telling me that I was not my husband's wife — that he had been married years before he met me to some low woman, of whom he was ashamed, and she was still alive. I did not believe it. I flew to him with the letter, calling on him to chastise the impudent and lying writer. But he had nothing to say for himself, Anthony. He stammered and equivocated, and became so confused that I saw the

dreadful accusation was true, and he was a married man, whilst *I*—was worse than nothing."

"What a *scoundrel*!" exclaimed Anthony, indignantly.

"Hush, dear! *Remember* he was your father. I was a proud girl, and I could not brook the insult. I would not pass another night beneath the same roof with him. In my extremity I flew to my brother, who, though he was implacable during my supposed prosperity, became an angel of mercy to me in my distress. He took me at once to Florence, where you, my Anthony, were born. I cannot tell you how I looked forward to the birth of my little child to cure my terrible heartache, but Culwarren had other views for me, and I was completely in his hands. He would brook no further disgrace upon his honourable name; and so when my trial was over, they told me that I was childless—that my baby had expired soon after his birth, and all that remained to me was to forget that he had lived. I was very unhappy, but I believed all they said, and for five years I lived in Florence under a feigned

name, until my brother thought it safe to bring me back to Gardenholme, where I found *you*, and believed you to be his child. You have heard the rest of the story, Tony—how your uncle substituted you for his dead baby, and gave you his name and protection. But why he did not carry out his benevolence to the end, and leave you in possession of your adopted rights, I cannot say. Perhaps he considered it would be an injury to Culwarren. Any way, I never guessed the truth until the day you came of age, and were so roughly and cruelly told of it yourself."

"And how did you guess it then, mother?"

"By the lawyer Ashfold dropping a hint to Lady Culwarren that you might be the child of the unfortunate Diana Melstrom. Then I went to Mrs. Matthews and made her tell me the truth."

"Matthews knows all about it, then?"

"Oh, yes. She was my own nurse, and was present at your birth, and brought you to England by her master's orders."

"Is she the only person living who knows your secret, mother?"

"I believe so. Sometimes I fancy Mr. Ashfold suspects my identity; but it can be only suspicion, for I never saw him until I had been settled here some time as the Countess's companion."

"But he may have seen *you*, dear."

"That is true, Tony, but improbable. He was not my brother's solicitor at that time."

"And Lady Culwarren has never suspected you?"

"How should she? We had never met. My mock marriage took place before my brother had been even introduced to her. Oh dear, no! She always speaks of Lady Diana Melstrom as a very improper person, and she considers Miss Paget to be the very pink of propriety."

"Well, it is a very sad history, darling mother," said Anthony; "and if my father lives, I should not like to come across him."

"I hope to heaven you never will, my Tony."

"And I am glad you have not told me his

name. I don't want to know it. I would rather think that he is dead."

"Yes, yes; that will be best for both of us. And perhaps he is so," replied Lady Diana, feverishly.

"And now, dear mother, what are we to do? You will not stay here any longer, will you? You will confess all to the Countess (privately if you will), and come and live with your son, who loves you more than all the world beside."

"Ah, Tony, it will be too much happiness! But what of Lily, my darling? She must be the first consideration."

"I am not afraid of Lily, mother. If the Countess still refuses her consent to our marriage, she will wait for me till she is twenty-one. Only twelve months more, and the time will pass so quickly with you for company. We have such long arrears of love to make up, mother; so many years of lost happiness to crowd into a few months."

"Ah, Tony! You make me grudge the cloak of respectability which I have purchased at so

dear a price. But all this cannot be done in a moment, darling. You must give me some little time to think it over. Meanwhile, I must keep you out of Lady Culwarren's sight. Call in Lily —the dear child is waiting for you in the ante-chamber—and I will initiate her into as much of our plans as it is wise she should know at present."

He embraced her again fondly, and leaving the room, returned with Lily, pouting at having been kept out in the cold so long.

"You naughty Miss Paget, keeping Tony all to yourself in this way! I have been expecting to hear Aunt Emily return every moment, and to be called into the drawing-room."

"Listen, dear Lily, and you shall have Tony back in a minute. I have to explain to your aunt the reasons I had for spreading the report of his death, and I do not wish her to see him until the explanation is over. Therefore he must go up to Mrs. Matthews' room and stay there until I tell him to come down again. Even if it stretches over nightfall, Tony, old nurse will

manage to make you up a bed upon her sofa. I will go on first and prepare her for your advent; and meanwhile, Lily, if you like to have another chat in the Lady's Bower, you can keep him there for half an hour and no more."

And with a bright smile she left the lovers to themselves.

CHAPTER XI.

A BOOTLESS BENE.

WHEN Fosbrooke — or rather, Arthur Loftus — met Lady Diana Melstrom so unexpectedly in the Cascine Gardens, it was a terrible shock to him, and for days afterwards he could think of nothing else. He had never forgotten the beautiful girl whom (in his way) he had so dearly loved and deeply wronged, though he tried hard to persuade his self-accusing conscience that he was the injured party. But he had thought of her as dead for more than twenty years, and that is a long time for remembrance and regret to live, side by side, in the human heart. That they had not entirely faded, however, was evidenced by the rapidity with which they revived. Notwithstanding that grief had made sad ravages in the

charms of his youthful love, she still retained sufficient traces, in both face and figure, of what she *had* been, to kindle afresh his feelings concerning her.

He went home that evening, not only puzzled and confused by what had passed between them, and stung by the acerbity of her speech and manner, but burning with desire to claim her once more as his own. If she could be persuaded, he thought, to forgive the past, now cast so far behind them, and to resume her position as mistress of his house, what a new life would open before him—what a better man he might become! He knew that his old father, Sir Hugh Loftus, could not, in the course of nature, last long, and that at his death, he must, as sole heir, inherit considerable property. If Diana would consent to live again with him, he would resume his rightful name, and try for the future to maintain the honour of his family, which he had hitherto played such havoc with. But he knew that if she consented to his proposal, it could only be on one condition, that—late in

the day as it was—he should make her his lawful wife. And Loftus did not really know if it were in his power to do so or not.

Since the frightful mistake of his youth had cropped up against him to destroy all his domestic happiness, and he had been informed that his first wife still lived to curse him, and Lady Diana, with bitter reproaches on her tongue, had left him for ever, he had not cared to inquire whether he was free or not. All his object had been to hide his disgrace, and prevent the woman from following him, and claiming the right to dwell under the same roof. He had paid down a large sum of money to her relatives, under the promise that they would prevent his incurring any further annoyance from her, and then he had changed his name and left England (as we have seen), and tried to court forgetfulness by the cruellest of all methods—dissipation.

He was thinking, however, of setting some inquiries on foot concerning the existence of his first wife, when the duel occurred, and he had the additional pang of learning that he

had fought and wounded *his own son.* Then all hope with regard to renewing his early love dream took leave of him for ever. He knew that he had placed an insuperable barrier between himself and Lady Diana for time and eternity, and believed himself accursed both of God and man. To have mortally wounded Anthony Melstrom would have been trouble enough for him in any case, for he loved the young man as if he had been a brother ; but to hear that the lad, whom he had regarded for his own good qualities, was actually the fruit of his loins—the child of which, in happier days, and in a vague, misty way, he had dreamt as riveting the last indissoluble link between his mother and himself—was overwhelming. He was so horror-stricken by the idea, that he readily yielded to the persuasions of Braganza and Vitozzi to avoid the possible consequences of the act by embarking with them from Brindisi for Algiers, where they spent the winter in the strictest seclusion. When he emerged from it, it was to hear that his father was dead, and the baronetcy and Warminster Hall

had passed into his possession. Meantime, Lady Diana had taken care he should not learn the news of Anthony's recovery. She was terribly afraid lest her son should fall again into his father's hands, and be told the secret of his birth. So when she had decided to ship him off to America, she removed him from Gordiani's to a distant hotel, and after his departure from Florence she sent the master of the restaurant a letter to say that if any friends inquired after Monsieur Melstrom, he was to tell them that he had experienced a relapse after leaving his house, and died of his wounds.

The first thing that Arthur Loftus did after his return was to institute this inquiry, and though he had anticipated the answer, it was (as he expressed it to himself) another nail in his coffin. The trial of the last six months had changed him terribly, and from being a hale, handsome man of middle age, he had become bowed in figure and haggard in face, with hair as white as snow. There is no despoiler of looks so merciless as a remorseful conscience. Day

and night the thought of Anthony, his murdered son, had been with this unhappy man; he could not drive it from his mind. Sometimes he saw him, brave, sympathetic, and ingenuous, as when he took the revolver from his reckless hand and saved his father's life, only that that father might take his own. At others, he recalled the honest indignation of the passionate youth when he remonstrated with him on his unworthy pursuits, and made a vow at all risks to save the man who had been reared as his brother. And then Sir Arthur would see the still, white face as he had looked at it last—silent, cold, and unconscious —smitten down by *him* who had given it life; and beside it the reproachful and impassioned mother, hurling an eternal curse at him for the devil's work which he had done.

Little wonder that, with *such* dreams, title, and wealth, and property seemed worse than useless to Sir Arthur Loftus. He came to Warminster Hall, indeed, and ordered it to be completely renovated, and newly furnished from basement to attic, for he determined that he would leave it

all to Lady Diana when he died, as a very slight compensation for the misery he had caused her. There were a great many workmen employed upon the Hall, for old Sir Hugh had been bed-ridden for several years before his death, and everything, both outside and inside the grand old place, had gone to rack and ruin. They were talking freely amongst themselves before the new baronet's arrival, wondering what he was like, and what age he might be, and if he would prove a good master, when one of their number, an old man called Panton, said :

"I can tell ye all ye wants to know, mates. I knew the barrow-knight when he wor a chap o' twenty, and I knowed his first wife too, and *she* was a beauty."

"What aged man is he, Panton?"

"Not much over five-and-forty, if any. 'Tis as near twenty-five years since I see him as can be. He was a soldier then, but some one told me as he's quit the army."

"Maybe he'll be a-marryin' now he's Sir Arthur," suggested another. "Forty-five is a good

ripe age for marriage. I don't hold with going in for it too early."

"*Marryin'!*" replied Panton; "why, bless you, he *be* married. "He's been married twice, has Sir Arthur, and I heerd 'twas to some grand leddy the last time; but I never seed her, and I ain't a good un for names. But the fust! Well, she was a one, and no mistake!"

"How did ye know 'er, mate?"

"Why, she was my own cousin, by the mother's side."

"Go along!"

"May I be struck blind if she wasn't! A fine gal, but a regler flyer. Mary Archer was her name. She had a beautiful voice, and used to sing on the music-halls. But I never seed her arter she went to live in Lunnun. It's a bad place, mates, and there's a lot of mischief goin' on theer."

"Ay, so theer be! I knows all about it, for my brother Sam, he's a potboy in 'Ackney, and can't never live upon his 'arnings. And you say Sir Arthur married your cousin?"

"That he did. But I don't think 'twas much of a marriage, for her old mother, who is a-livin' now in Springham, hard by, she won't never talk of it, but says, 'Let things be'; and the sooner forgotten, the better."

"Ay, ay! She's a sensible body. And what kind of a lookin' gentleman is Sir Arthur, now?"

"Oh, straight and 'andsome. All the Loftuses is that. Did ye ever see the old gentleman that's gone? *Theer* was a figger for you. Ninety-two on his coffin lid, and as straight as a harrer when he last stood upright. Oh, yes! Sir Arthur's a fine 'andsome gentleman, as you'll see, and a credit to his title."

But when Sir Arthur arrived, with a face as long as a hatchet, and a slow step and white hair, the workmen began to chaff Panton about his "handsome gentleman."

"Wheer's he gone to? Been changed at mess, I should say," they remarked, laughing.

Panton scratched his head, as he replied:

"Well, I'm blowed! I shouldn't have known him, mates, from Adam. Why, I must be a good

fifteen years his elder, and I can do my day's work still. Don't seem to me as if he could lift a hammer. I *am* blowed!"

Added to the great change in appearance, Sir Arthur seemed to have lost his memory, for though Panton, who was a decorator, was constantly in his way, he never recognised him. At last the workman thought he might venture to introduce himself to his employer. He was engaged on some delicate gilding about the drawing-room panels, and he asked the Baronet one day if he thought a little intermixture of bronze would not be effective. Sir Arthur gazed at the work in his sad, silent manner, and then replied, with a sigh, that he really didn't care, but would leave it entirely to the good taste of the decorator.

"Beg pardon, Sir Arthur," said Panton, with a touch of his cap, as the Baronet was about to move on, "but you don't recollect me, sir."

Sir Arthur turned round and looked at the man.

"No," he said, "I do not. Have I ever met you before?"

"Likelier you'll remember my name, sir. I'm Joe Panton, as used to live at Lexham."

A faint colour came into Sir Arthur's pale cheek.

"Panton — Lexham!" he repeated. "Do you mean to say you were related to the Archers?"

"Yes, Sir Arthur; I was Mary Archer's cousin. Maybe ye didn't notice me much in those days, but I was under the carpenter there, and lodged with Mary's mother. The old lady's living still, sir."

"Oh, is she? When do you strike work, Panton?"

"At twelve o'clock, Sir Arthur, punctual."

"Come to my private room then. I wish to speak to you. I—I—will remunerate you for your loss of time."

And then he walked on to some other department, languidly and indifferently, as if nothing had occurred to stir up the waters of his past life or shed a gleam of hope upon the present. For what could anything avail to him or Lady

Diana now that Anthony was dead? That fatal act had sealed his lonely fate.

Sir Arthur's private room was one fitted for his temporary convenience upstairs, whilst the workmen held the lower floor. There, at noon, he encountered his former acquaintance, Joe Panton, who, after much solicitation, was persuaded to sit down.

"I think you said this morning," commenced Sir Arthur, "that Mary Archer's mother is still alive?"

"So she is, sir, and hale and hearty for a woman of eighty years. She lives close by here, at Springham, with her grand-daughter, Mrs. Jones, who was Bill Archer's eldest girl."

"And where is Mary Archer — I mean the woman I made my wife—living now?"

Joe Panton started.

"Bless me, Sir Arthur! Don't you know as she's bin dead this many a year?"

"I have heard nothing about it; that is why I asked you the question. We separated, as I dare say you know, shortly after the marriage—

indeed, I never acknowledged her as my wife. About twenty years ago, when she seemed disposed to annoy me, I transferred a considerable sum of money to her mother for her use on the condition she never applied to me again, and she never has. But I should like to know for certain if she is dead or alive."

"Oh, she's dead, Sir Arthur; no question about that. She died in the Amerikys, and I've seen the certificate of death. But if you'll pardon my putting the question, sir, did you give me to understand that Mary Archer tried to annoy you twenty years ago?"

"Twenty-one years ago, to speak correctly. Certainly she did."

"And you had to pay her mother then to keep her quiet?"

"Well, I paid for Mary to be kept out of my way. I paid the money to her mother instead of herself, because I had once before been deceived by her. I wouldn't live with her because I knew she had not led a respectable life away from me, and yet I wished to avoid the scandal

of a public separation. Since then I have heard nothing and cared to hear nothing. Now I do, and am prepared to pay well for correct information. Look here, Panton, I'll give you twenty pounds if you'll get me a copy of the certificate of her death."

Joe Panton moved about in his chair uneasily.

"Well, Sir Arthur, I'm not in a position to say no to twenty pounds, sir. I'm only a working man, and I have a large family. But it will be robbing you, sir, and I say so beforehand, and that you've been robbed before into the bargain. You say you paid money twenty-one years ago to keep Mary Archer's tongue quiet. Why, the Lord had quieted it long before that. She died in the town of Boston *twenty-three* years ago, and that's the gospel truth, whoever says contrary."

Sir Arthur rose from his seat in great agitation.

"*Twenty-three* years ago? But that was the first report that reached me. It was on the strength of that that I married again, Panton. And then letters were sent to my wife and myself stating that your cousin still lived and was coming

home to claim her rights. It broke up all my domestic happiness, as you may suppose, and I have been a wanderer ever since. Only to prevent the horror of Mary Archer following me and claiming me as her husband, I paid old Mrs. Archer two thousand pounds, for which she signed a paper in her daughter's name resigning all claims upon me. My solicitor gave her the alternative of that or putting her daughter into the Divorce Court, and she chose the money. Do you mean to tell me I was swindled?"

"Well, Sir Arthur," replied Panton, caressing his beard, "I don't think I'm mistaken in saying my cousin Mary died in Boston twenty-three years ago. She was living with a theatre manager, or summat of that sort, of the name of Dawson; and arter he came home I see the man at her mother's house, and read the certificate. She died of an attack of pneumonia. You see, sir, I has it all pat. And dead or not, my aunt Archer oughter known better than let the wench trouble you, for she was no good any way. But I know I'm right, sir; I know I'm right."

"Then the truth is, Panton, that Mrs. Archer has defrauded me of two thousand pounds on false pretences."

"And Mary's sister Emma, *she* had a hand in it, no doubt. She was a bad un was Emma, and up to any wickedness. The old woman would never have thought of such a put-up job by herself."

"Is Emma Archer living?"

"Oh, yes, Sir Arthur. She ain't married, and she bides with her mother still."

"Very good. You shall have your twenty pounds, Panton, but I shan't trouble you any further. My solicitor, Mr. Ashfold, who was here yesterday, has gone on to Gardenholme. I will write at once and ask him to return. He is the proper person to deal with Mrs. Archer and her daughter Emma. He will soon explain to them that if they do not tell me the truth now, and give up the certificate or the name of the church where it may be procured, they will find themselves in court on a charge of fraud. If they still have the documents, it will not be long before they are in my possession."

Mr. Panton left the room richer by twenty pounds than when he had entered it; but the information he had received did not seem to impart one ray of hope to Sir Arthur Loftus. What was the use of finding out that the disappointment of his youth was but a hideous nightmare, when the blood of their own child rose up between Lady Diana and himself, and would so rise even on the other side of the grave? Still, for *her* sake—that *her* life might no longer be overclouded by the stain that rested on it now, and obliged her to hide her identity from the world, as if she had committed some horrible crime—it was his duty to clear up the mystery and establish her right to the name of Lady Diana Loftus.

When Lady Culwarren returned from her afternoon drive with the little solicitor, they were met by the messenger from Warminster Hall, with a note begging Mr. Ashfold, if his services could be dispensed with, to return to Sir Arthur at once.

"This is very awkward, my lady," he said.

"I have not yet had that talk with the Earl about the Bilger property; but Sir Arthur's request is so urgent that if you could spare me for a few hours, I should be very much obliged. I could return this evening, doubtless, or to-morrow, if it will be all the same to you."

"Oh, go to Warminster Hall by all means, Mr. Ashfold," replied the Countess. "Sir Arthur would never have sent over a carriage for you unless it had been something very particular. I hope he is not ill. You say he looks so delicate, but I suppose it is the doctor, and not the lawyer, he would have summoned in that case."

"Exactly so. No, I imagine it must be some trouble with the builders' estimates, and Sir Arthur wishes me to look into the matter again before I leave this part of the country. He has been such a *dilettante* for years past that he has very little idea of business."

"Well, you had better start at once, Mr. Ashfold, and then you may be back in time for dinner. If you can persuade Sir Arthur to return with you, I shall be so glad to see him. Cul-

warren wants shaking up sadly. He is too ridiculously sensitive, and persists in blaming himself for the death of that young man in Florence. As if any one could have prevented his headstrong behaviour! But we have had a melancholy household since. Sometimes I almost think it would have been better if he had lived. The trouble certainly has not ceased with his death."

"Exactly so. But doubtless his lordship will get over it in time. Mr. Anthony Melstrom struck me as being a favourite of Miss Paget's. How did *she* feel his loss?" inquired Mr. Ashfold, inquisitively.

"Less than the others, or so it appeared to me. But you know what Miss Paget is—so cold and reserved that there's no guessing how much she does or does not feel. She has said little enough about it, at all events. Perhaps she thinks, like many others, that his death solved a riddle that might have proved a very difficult one."

"Exactly so; and now that it is all over, the

less said about it the better. Poor lad! poor lad! It was a sad fate for one so young and full of promise. Well, my lady, I shall take my leave. If I don't go at once I shall not be back to-night."

And with a profound bow the little solicitor jumped into the carriage, and was driven back to Warminster Hall.

CHAPTER XII.

AT LAST.

LORD CULWARREN and his mother could not understand what made Lily look so radiant and Miss Paget so placidly content at the dinner-table that evening. The girl had not dared to change her mourning dress after what had passed between her aunt and herself that morning; but she wore a bouquet of roses at her belt, and her eyes looked so soft and humid, and the dimples showed so plainly about her mouth, that Lord Culwarren almost dared to think that she regretted her decision, and had called up her long-lost smiles to tell him so. Miss Paget had assumed her gayest garb—a flowing dress of mingled gray and white, and the large cap she usually wore was replaced

by a head-dress of white lace. She knew that all concealment must so soon be over that she did not care how much she looked like her former self.

"Why, how festive you both appear!" cried the Countess, as they met. "What is the reason of this miraculous change? Are the days of mourning over?"

"Is it not almost time they were?" demanded her companion, with a quiet smile.

"And you said you were tired of seeing our black this morning, Aunt Emily," added her niece.

"Oh, if it's *done* to please *me*, I'm very much obliged to you," returned Lady Culwarren, graciously. "Miss Paget, if you knew how handsome you look without that cumbersome cap you generally wear, you would throw it into the fire. Really, your hair is beautiful. It's so seldom that one sees real golden hair. I can't think *why* you should disfigure yourself so much. If you would take a little pains with your toilette, and go out more into society, I don't see why

you shouldn't be married yet. Many men prefer sensible women to half-fledged girls."

But at the word *marriage* the companion's smile faded.

"I thank your ladyship for your kind wishes," she said, "but the thought has no charms for me. I think we will confine ourselves to choosing a husband for our little Lily here," putting one hand caressingly on the girl's shoulder.

"Ah! that is easily done," replied Lady Culwarren; "it only needs her own consent to make her one of the happiest wives in Christendom."

"And that is just what I hope to be, Aunt Emily," said Lily, blushing from brow to bosom.

The companion evidently thought that the conversation was taking too personal a turn, for she interrupted it by asking:

"Where is Mr. Ashfold? Is he not going to stay the night at Gardenholme?"

"Yes. I hoped he would be back by dinner-time, but I suppose Sir Arthur has detained him."

"Sir Arthur!" ejaculated Culwarren.

"Yes. He sent the carriage for him at four o'clock, as he wanted to speak to him on urgent business; but Mr. Ashfold said he should certainly return to-night."

"Sir Arthur appears determined to restore the Hall to its mediæval beauty," said the Earl. "I hear all the modern stained-glass windows are to be taken out and replaced with some which he has bought in Italy at a fabulous sum; and the Gobelins tapestry, with which the banqueting-chamber was hung, has been sent to Paris to be renovated. An entirely new sixteen-stall stable is in course of erection, and the grounds are to be laid out under the supervision of some celebrated man who is coming down from London for the purpose."

"Doubtless Sir Arthur is a man of taste, my dear. Ashfold tells me he is quite a connoisseur on all subjects, and, having travelled so much abroad, he has become disgusted with the barbarianism of England. Besides, he and his father were not on good terms, you know,

and old memories may not be pleasant to him; so he is very wise to make as many alterations as possible."

"Sir Arthur is a bachelor, I suppose, mother?"

"Of course, Culwarren! We should have heard long ago if there had been a Lady Loftus. I believe he *was* married when quite young, but it is so many years ago that no one speaks of it. Now he will naturally marry again. It would be folly to let the title pass to some distant member of the family. I wonder *who* would be a suitable match for him? I should have been on the look-out for my Lily, if I had not had other views for her."

"Oh, Aunt Emily! An old man like that!" cried Lily, shrugging her shoulders.

"My love, you have never seen Sir Arthur; besides, he is *not* an old man. Forty-five is the very prime of life. Lady Muriel Chester would be a charming wife for him. I think, when he is a little more settled, I shall ask her down here, and introduce them to each other."

"Aunt Emily, you should set up a matri-

monial agency. You are a regular match-maker," said Lily, gleefully. The poor little thing had not been so merry for a long time past. But Lady Culwarren came down upon her rather sharply.

"Lily, that remark is flippant and vulgar. I'm sure I don't know whom you inherit it from. Not from my dear sister, who was refinement itself; and your father, Sir Richard, was one of the most elegant of men. It must be contamination. I hope you will get over it."

"I was only joking, Aunt Emily. I meant no harm," said the girl, apologetically.

"Perhaps not; but your behaviour seems very strange to me—one moment down in the dumps, and the next up in the clouds. What are you pinching my arm for, Culwarren?"

He stooped down and whispered in her ear:

"Let her alone. I think I know the reason of the change. Let us leave the table and go into the library."

"Very good, my dear, we will do as you

wish. Lily, come with me. Will you not accompany us, Miss Paget?"

"I will join you presently, Lady Culwarren. I have something important to say to you and his lordship. At present, I have business upstairs."

Lily edged nearer to her.

"May I not come with you?" she said in a low voice.

"No, not now. In a short time I shall return and tell them everything. Then my fate and *his* will be decided. Till then, Lily, silence."

She ascended to the upper storey as she spoke, and conferred with Anthony and Mrs. Matthews as to the best means of revealing her identity to her sister-in-law. Meantime, Lord and Lady Culwarren, with Lily Osprey, betook themselves to the library, and were soon occupied with the magazines and newspapers of the day. It was the girl's usual custom to wander in the grounds after dinner, and feed upon her own sad thoughts, but to-night she sat bolt upright in her chair, with a flushed cheek

and a wandering eye, unable to fix her attention upon anything, waiting for the moment when Miss Paget should return and inform Lady Culwarren that Anthony was alive and under the very roof of Gardenholme. But more than that Lily did not know. The companion had not yet summoned sufficient courage to tell the girl anything that should make her shrink from her. Presently there was a murmur in the hall, and Lily thought that she was coming. But the footman threw open the door and announced Mr. Ashfold and Sir Arthur Loftus. The little solicitor appeared rosy, and smiling, and rubbing his hands.

"Sorry to have been detained, your ladyship, though in a good cause; but now that I have come I have fulfilled your commands and brought Sir Arthur with me. Lady Culwarren, Miss Osprey, Lord Culwarren, Sir Arthur Loftus. Exactly so."

Sir Arthur, who was attired in deep mourning, came forward reluctantly. His pallor and attenuation, combined with his white hair, caused him

not to be immediately recognised by his acquaintance, but he did not enjoy the privilege long.

"Sir Arthur Loftus," exclaimed the Countess, extending her hand, "I am delighted to know you, and I consider it most neighbourly of you to visit us on so informal an invitation. I wish you had come to dinner. The conventionalities of London need not bind us in the country, and since the Abbey and the Hall are so near each other, I trust that we shall see a great deal of you. Culwarren, come and give Sir Arthur a hearty welcome back to England."

The Earl advanced a few steps, as though to do his mother's bidding, and then drew himself up with dignity and placed his hands behind his back.

"No, thank you. No power on earth should induce me to put my hand in his. I thought there was no mistaking the ring of that voice, that has sounded like a knell in my ears for so many miserable months."

"Culwarren," exclaimed the Countess, in her

pride, "what can you mean? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No. It is *he* who must be mad to expect a welcome at Gardenholme. Look how he hangs his head. He dares not look me in the face. How I have longed to meet you again, *Oliver Fosbrooke*!"

"Oliver Fosbrooke!" reiterated the Countess, pulling up her gold *pince-nez*. "Why, so it is! And yet—Sir Arthur Loftus. Dear me! This is very interesting."

"One moment, mother, before we begin our mutual congratulations on meeting. Oliver Fosbrooke, Sir Arthur, or whatever you may choose to call yourself, what have you done with my brother, Anthony Melstrom?"

"He was *not* your brother, Culwarren," interpolated the Countess.

"Be silent, mother, and let this man speak the truth, if he can."

"Lord Culwarren, in mercy spare me!" said Sir Arthur, humbly.

"*Spare you!* Is it possible that shame and

remorse have already found out the new-made owner of Warminster Hall? *Spare you!* Did *you* spare the boy who, in a generous and loving desire to save me from the clutches of yourself and others like you, spoke a few hot words of truth, for which you *killed him*?"

Lady Culwarren shut her eyes, and made a gesture of abhorrence, as if she had been offered a black dose.

"My dear Culwarren, pray be moderate in your expressions. If gentlemen *will* fight duels——"

"Mother, when a skilled swordsman meets a boy who never handled a sword except in play before, the world may call it a duel, but justice names it—*murder!*"

"My God!" exclaimed the Baronet, with a groan. "Do I not know it?"

"You own it?" cried Culwarren. "Own one thing more. I have longed to meet you. I have inquired and searched for you everywhere since that unhappy moment, and most of all, I have longed to meet you in the crowded thoroughfare that I might tell the whole world what I say

now — that you are a miserable coward and a scoundrel."

"Exactly so," said Mr. Ashfold; "but might I entreat your lordship to choose some other time and place?"

"Let him go on," interrupted Sir Arthur; "let him say what he pleases and think what he pleases. He cannot judge me more hardly than I have judged myself. No word of his, however bitter, will tempt me to reply."

"Do you realise what you have done?" exclaimed the Earl, passionately. "Anthony's pale face is ever haunting me. His spirit will not rest till I have avenged him—life for life!"

"Oh! this is madness," cried Lady Culwarren. "Now *they* are going to fight. Will no one stop them? Where is Miss Paget?"

"Pray don't excite yourself, my lady; nothing will happen," said the lawyer. "Sir Arthur has come here with an express purpose. When that is accomplished he will go home."

"I deserve all you have said to me, Lord Culwarren," replied Sir Arthur, "and believe me

or not, as you will, if the sacrifice of *my* life would bring back *his*, I would die in torture, and be thankful for the pain."

"I am sure no one could say more," interposed the Countess.

"Your words are as vain as your would-be sacrifice," replied her son. "Nothing can bring back our dead. But I refuse to see you or to let any of my family see you again. Leave my house at once, and do not presume to return to it."

"One moment, Lord Culwarren. I have come here this evening in the hope to repair, as far as may be, a bitter wrong."

"How can you repair it? Your words are folly."

"Pardon me. You do not even guess to what I allude. If you will permit me to speak, you shall judge whether Anthony's death will not be terribly avenged through all my future life."

At that moment Lady Diana, who had ended her consultation with her son, appeared at the library door. But when she saw *who* stood

amongst them, she drew back with an involuntary exclamation that directed the general attention towards her.

"Here *is* the lady," whispered Ashfold to his client. Sir Arthur turned towards her, but dared not meet her eyes.

"Lady Diana," he said, in a low voice.

"Why do you call me by my name?" she answered, unhesitatingly, as she came forward. "What falsehood would you tell me now?"

"No falsehood, but the solemn truth. Bowed, humbled to the very dust, a broken-hearted and repentant man, I have come here—not to ask your forgiveness, though I so sorely need it—but to do you a simple justice."

"It is rather late to seek to do me justice," she answered, bitterly.

"Exactly so; but hear what he has to say," exclaimed the little solicitor. "God bless my soul! no one will let the poor man speak."

"I would have done it before had I been able; but now it shall be full and abundant. Ah! do

not look at me so coldly. I have but this to say, and then I will go back to the Hall. You are my wife!"

"Miss Paget is his wife!" cried Lady Culwarren. "Why, the poor creature must be insane!"

"No, Lady Culwarren, I am not, although I have borne enough to make me so. But this lady, to whom your husband's roof has so long given generous shelter, is his sister, whom you believed to be dead—the Lady Diana Melstrom."

"Diana! Oh, it is impossible!" exclaimed the Countess.

"It is the truth, Lady Culwarren," said Lady Diana. "Mrs. Matthews is a witness to the fact. I was going to tell you of it when Sir Arthur anticipated me."

"And why has this extraordinary deception been kept up for so many years, then?" replied the Countess, angrily. "The family seems a mass of impositions, and I think I have been shamefully used all through."

"Let me explain this mystery to you, Lady Culwarren," said Sir Arthur. "When Lady Diana and I were young we loved each other, but her brother disapproved of the connection, and we fled from the Abbey together and were married."

"We *thought* we were," interposed Lady Diana.

"Diana," he said, looking at her for the first time, "we *were* married. It is to tell you so that I am here this evening. When I stood by your side at the altar my first wife was, as I believed her, dead; but her wretched relatives came forward for the purpose of extorting money from me to buy their silence, and falsely swore that she was still alive. You, believing your good name was lost, left me and returned to the protection of your brother. Then came the report that you, the Lady Diana Melstrom, had died of grief and shame."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lady Diana. "What *am* I to believe?"

"I do not ask you to credit my assertion on my bare word," replied the Baronet; "but Mr. Ashfold has seen the woman's friends—has extracted their written depositions—and holds the certificate of my first wife's death—twenty-three years ago."

"Exactly so," said the solicitor, producing the papers from his pocket; "and I have brought them for your ladyship's inspection. There is no doubt at all about it—that you have been Lady Diana Loftus all along, and if you had had a little patience or—or——"

"A little less resentment, you would say, Mr. Ashfold, much of the bitterness of my life might have been avoided," replied Lady Diana. "But my pride was too deeply wounded for concession. Yet, had I only known it, these weary years of self-reproach—of ceaseless regret and unmerited punishment—might have been made so sweet. Oh, Arthur! why did you not think of this before?"

"Whom had I to think of when you were, so far as I knew, *dead*?"

Lady Culwarren went up to Lady Diana and put her arms about her.

"If you are really Diana," she said, softly, "forgive me if I have wounded you unconsciously. I have always loved you as a sister. Let us be sisters in reality for the future."

Lady Diana pressed her hand, but turned again to Sir Arthur Loftus.

"You have only told them half the truth," she said. "Confess it to the end."

"The boy Anthony, whom I took away from here, thinking he might be useful to me for my own selfish purposes — the boy who had saved me from becoming a suicide—whom I employed to lead Lord Culwarren to his ruin; the boy whose generous warmth should have moved what remained in my hard heart of sympathy—O God, forgive me!—I lifted up my hand against him, and killed *our son*."

"No, no," cried Lily Osprey, impetuously. She had watched Sir Arthur's increasing emotion with tears in her own eyes, and when he fell back in his chair and sobbed with the terrible

earnestness of a man unused to weeping, she could restrain herself no longer.

"Hush, Lily," exclaimed Lady Diana; "leave that to me. It is my right. I never knew till now how sweet revenge could be."

She flew from the room as she spoke, and those she left behind her regarded each other with amazement.

"Anthony Melstrom *their son*?" exclaimed Lady Culwarren. "Ah, Mr. Ashfold, how correct you were! I shall put the most implicit faith in you from this moment."

"Your ladyship does me honour. But this is a terrible solution to the mystery. Killed his own son! Poor fellow! There is no happiness left for him in this world, I fear."

"Why should you say you *fear*?" demanded Lord Culwarren. "Who would *wish* him happiness after the committal of so foul a deed?"

"Oh, hush! hush! Pray have patience," cried Lily; "there is a great surprise in store for all of you. Only wait till Miss Paget comes back."

And in effect, at that very moment, Lady Diana reappeared with a bright smile upon her face and her finger to her lip.

"Take your revenge, Diana," said Sir Arthur, in a broken voice. "I thank Heaven that I am able to restore your right and lift from you the necessity of living a hidden and ignominious life. But there my satisfaction ends. I dare not even ask for your forgiveness. I know that my days must be spent alone, and that we are parted *for ever*."

"Arthur, it is in my power to remit the heaviest portion of your load. I wished to protect my son from you — to protect myself —and so I told the world that he had left me. And so he had, but only for another country, whence I have received him home again, safe and well."

"Home again!" exclaimed Sir Arthur, starting up. "Do you mean to say that Anthony *lives*?"

"Why, he was killed in the duel at Florence," said Lady Culwarren.

"Exactly so. But dead men sometimes come back to life," replied Mr. Ashfold.

Meanwhile, Lady Diana had darted to the door, and returned bringing Anthony with her.

"Arthur, my vengeance is complete. Take this dear hand in yours, and believe that the future may have power to redeem the past by restoring to our love and care—*our son*."

Sir Arthur sprang to his feet, held out his arms impulsively to Anthony, and then dropped them to his side, murmuring, "No! no! I am not worthy."

"Father," cried the young man, "won't you welcome me?"

"Oh! my boy! my boy! You are saved!"

"Yes, by my dear mother's care!"

He threw his arms about Lady Diana's neck as he spoke, and getting possession of her left hand, tried to place it in that of Sir Arthur. The Baronet looked up into her face, but dared not touch her. His eyes, still unaltered, shone on her once more with the love that glorified her youth. She looked back in them again,

and with a gentle sigh stretched out her hand, and placing it in his, whispered:

"For Anthony's sake!"

"Exactly so!" said Mr. Ashfold.

THE END

LONDON: SPENCER BLACKETT, 35, ST. BRIDE STREET, E.C.

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